MAHMOUD DARWISH

In the Presence of Absence

Translated from the Arabic by Sinan Antoon

archipelago books

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[The remains of the destroyed cemetery in al-Birwa, Palestine]

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

. . . .

In the Presence of Absence (Fī Ḥaḍrat al-Ghiyāb) was published in the original Arabic in 2006. As with every work Darwish published in the last four decades, its appearance in the Arab world was an event. Darwish was the most popular and prominent Arab poet and had become a major world poet. With every new work, he surprised his readers and entered another phase in his ongoing birth, as he called it. This work was designated in its subtitle as a "text." It was neither a collection of poems, nor an ordinary work of prose. The book's title and cover already welcomed the reader into the space Darwish was creating. A space where presence and absence, prose and poetry, and many other opposites converse and converge. He was at the apex of his genius and creativity, but with the knowledge that his death might be imminent. (He died two years later, on August 9, 2008). Thinking this might be his final work, he summoned all his poetic genius to create a luminous text that defies categorization. Twice before Darwish had experienced brushes with death due to heart problems, and wrote about defying death in his epic poem, *Mural*. Now it was time to bid himself farewell, before others do, and write his self-elegy. The book's cover itself mimics a tombstone, if we read the author's name and the title as one sentence: "Mahmoud Darwish, in the presence of absence." But it is a tombstone promising an eternal presence in words.

Self-elegy is an established genre in classical Arabic poetry, with roots going back to pre-Islamic times. In Darwish's hands, this kernel is

introduced to new ground and branches out toward new horizons. The living "I" bids farewell to its imagined dying other in a sustained poetic address divided into twenty untitled sections. Each section, however, is a self-contained unit and addresses a theme or a phase in the author's past. On the threshold of immortality, the poet reflects on his own existence, intertwined with that of his exiled people through both historical narrative and material reality.

Although there is obviously an autobiographical dimension to the work, it should not be reduced to that. Perhaps "poetography" would be more appropriate, even if it fails, just as any single category would, in fully framing the text.

Why poetography? Because in this text, as in his life, Darwish was a poet first and foremost. His being and desire were devoted to writing poetry. A major thread throughout the text recalls the genesis and maturation of a poet and a life *in* and *for* poetry. He was born twice, first as others are, but the second time as a poet. The text traces the young child's initial encounter and fascination with language and the magic of words, the raw material out of which he would later construct a metaphorical homeland for his people. Before the poet was born in the boy, however, he was exiled from Palestine, together with his family, and became a refugee in Lebanon. He later returned to live in his own homeland as a present absentee, his designation by the state of Israel. It is a poetography of the poet who was destined to become a Trojan poet, who reminded the world that it had yet to hear the voice of the Trojans: "Homer is the glorious song of the Greeks. There is no doubt that the Trojans would have expressed things differently, but their voice was forever lost. I, as poet, am in search of those voices." His poetry and politics took him to prison and house arrest and, later, to various exiles, where he witnessed the tragic chapters in the collective history of his people and voiced their will to live, love, and be. Much of his poetry was and is the intertwining of history and mythology and the intersection or fusion of the individual with the collective.

But the Trojan poet was equally determined to be the poet he imagined himself to be, and to protect and preserve the aesthetics of his project. But to be the poet of a people and a homeland par excellence, while somehow allowing one's poetry to remain free of the political demands and immense

expectations – to write one's own poetry – was a daunting task and would have been debilitating for most poets. With stubbornness and a restless creative spirit, Darwish succeeded in this and continued to transcend and reinvent himself, becoming a great world poet.

Some of the sections of the text look back at the poet's private space and his intimate and daily habits, but even these are centered around the beauty of words and language. His day is structured around the act of writing and dedicated to the search for the next poem. Even the mundane and the ephemeral are elevated here when they are seen through the poetic eye. The sublime and universal, such as love and longing, occupy the poet as well, and invite his interrogative and philosophical reflections. The eternal exile and incessant traveler makes sure to revisit his favorite cities. He praises exile for its gifts before bidding it farewell to return. But where to? What remains of the poet's village in the Galilee are remnants, left in a country still founded on his absence and erasure. He needs a special permit to visit his family for a few days. In Palestine he stands before his own absence and looks at a life interrupted.

It is a poetography because it is not only a final look back at the poetics of life from a rare space where opposites bleed and blend into each other: life and death, home and exile, but also, and most important, poetry and prose. When asked about *In the Presence of Absence,* Darwish said, "I was searching for another form for writing. This text is the convergence of two genres: prose and poetry."

Blocks of poetry, written in meter and with rhyme, were set apart from the rest of the Arabic text in the original. I have kept this distinction in the translation. The rest of the text, while not in metered poetry, pulsates with syntactic rhythms and frequently includes internal rhyme. Although not without effort, I have tried, whenever possible, to render this in translation.

Darwish stressed that his main concern in this work was "to give the beauty of Arabic prose its maximum potential . . . I was interested in celebrating language and making it dance, as if I were working in a festival of words, images, and aesthetics, liberated from any other consideration. I wanted to free the demons, doves, and birds of Arabic."

It is challenging to attempt to translocate this celebration to another language, but it had to be done. It is one of the most beautiful books I have

read in Arabic.

I would like to thank Ibrahim Muhawi for his valuable suggestions and Jill Schoolman for her support, patience, and impeccable edits.

Derrida remarked once that "every text remains in mourning until it is translated." This translation is an act of love for Darwish and homage to his poetry and genius. It marks the end of a mourning period following his death. It also celebrates his eternal presence in his words and his long life in us, his readers.

Sinan Antoon

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Do not go far! they say as they bury me
Where, if not faraway, is my place?

MĀLIK IBN AL-RAYB (D. 676)

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In the Presence of Absence

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I

. . . .

I scatter you before me line by line with a mastery I possessed only in beginnings.

Just as you asked me, I stand now in your name to thank those who have come to bid you farewell before this final journey and to call on them to hasten their farewell and go on to a banquet befitting your memory.

Allow me to see you, now that you have left me and I have left you, safe and sound like pure prose on a stone that may turn green or yellow in your absence. Allow me to gather you and your name, just as passersby gather the olives that harvesters forgot under pebbles. Let us then go together, you and I, on two paths:

You, to a second life promised to you by language, in a reader who might survive the fall of a comet on earth.

I, to a rendezvous I have postponed more than once with a death to whom I had promised a glass of red wine in a poem. A poet is at liberty to lie, but he only lies in love because the heart’s provinces are open to alluring conquests.

As for death, nothing insults it like betrayal, its proven specialty. Let me then set off for my rendezvous as soon as I find a grave with a marble headstone over which only my ancestors will challenge me. I do not care if a letter falls from my name, just as the *Yā'* fell from my grandfather's name by mistake.

Let me go, without cane or rhyme, on a path we have tread aimlessly, with no desire to arrive because we have read so many books warning us that summits have no beyond. So we preferred to stand at the foot of mountains —not free of the frisson of anticipation that tacit gratitude between opposites inspires. Had I known you, I would have possessed you, and had you known me, you would have possessed me. But then you and I would not be.

Thus, my friend, in rhythmic collusion, we named the abyss that existed between us the foot of a mountain and attributed to books we had read our failure to reach a summit overlooking a nothingness necessary to test existence. O my I, resting on the rise of whiteness from an eternity, and on eternity waving a whiteness beyond which no color lies. Which of your meanings can capture this white absurdity? With which form shall I protect your meaning from nothingness, when our journey is shorter than a priest's sermon in an abandoned church on a Sunday where no one is safe from the wrath of the gods?

But you lie stretched out before me, I mean in my words, where metaphors find neither their source nor a secret bond between pious earth and pagan sky. Clouds depart from here to there, escorted by a moon whose rocky secret is divulged, yet this does not keep us from recalling a past love. Nor did the heart's drought stop us from treating aching joints with the memory of stretching out on the grass, just as you lie stretched out now before me in my words, which will not be let down by a private tomorrow that has stopped deceiving. Not because it has become polite and proper, but because it is now dying and becoming a tale with neither enemy nor friend. A tale of two travelers, you and I, who never parted company in a mirror or

a road, parting for a few hours only to ascertain the female's hold over the male.

When one sees oneself in the flashes of lightning, as one is, healthy and untainted by the bruises of others' visions of a death that does not give life . . . and a life lived through the lover's share of intimacy that exists between creator and his beloved creation. The only paradise we know through our senses and intuition is that of the beloved, and the only hell, disappointment in love.

Allow me, then, as we part company at this threshold, to break the contract between one absurdity and another. For we do not know who triumphed and who was defeated, me, you, or death, because we had not conceded beforehand that the enemy was smarter and more cunning in order to triumph. Nothing invites defeat more than shunning this admission. O my friend searching for an absurdity necessary to train the self to be tolerant and to be graced with contemplating water that dimples and laughs and flies like a butterfly creating poetry out of every living thing. For lightness, like dew, conquers metal and is the virgin of time; it teaches the beasts to play the ney.

So do not reconcile with anything except for this obscure reason. Do not regret a war that ripened you just as August ripens pomegranates on the slopes of stolen mountains. For there is no other hell waiting for you. What once was yours is now against you.

And you must defend the discrete letters of your name as a cat would its kittens. Do what you must: defend the window's right to look at passersby. Do not ridicule yourself if you are incapable of providing proof. Air is air and does not require a certificate of blood. Do not regret! Do not regret what you missed when you took a nap; recording the names of invaders in the book of sand. Ants narrate and the rain erases. When you wake up, do not regret that you were dreaming and asked no one: Are you a pirate? Someone, however, will ask you: Are you a pirate? How will you supply the obvious with documents and rifles when it has enough wooden plows,

pottery jars, oil that illuminates without being kindled, a Qur'an, braids of peppers and okra, and a horse that does not fight?

So do not blame your ancestors for bequeathing you the innocence of looking at hills without the readiness to receive revelation from a low sky, but rather to count the stars on your ten fingers. How are you to prove the obvious when proof thirsts to loot self-evidence like a pirate thirsting for a lost ship? The obvious is defenseless like a gazelle stabbed by safety, like you. Like you in this field wide-open to armed archaeologists who never cease to interrogate you: Who are you? You check all your body parts and say: I am myself. They say: Where is the proof? You say: I am. They say: This is not enough. We need lack. So you say: I am both perfection and lack. They say: Say that you are a stone so we can end our excavation. You say: If only the young man were a stone. But they did not understand you.

They forced you from the field. As for your shadow, it neither followed you nor deceived you. It froze there and became a stone. Then it grew green like a sesame plant, green during the day and blue at night. Then it grew and soared like a willow, green by day and blue by night.

No matter how near you come, you will remain distant. No matter how often you are killed, you will live. So do not think that you are dead there, and alive here. Nothing proves this or that but metaphor. Metaphors that teach beings the play of words. Metaphors that form a geography from a shadow. Metaphors that will gather you and your name. So ascend with your people, higher and farther than what the myths have prepared for you and me. Write, yourself, the history of your heart, from the moment Adam was struck with love, until the resurrection of your people. And write, yourself, the history of your kind, from the time you borrowed the sea's rhythm and manner of breathing, until your return to me alive. You lie before me, like a rhyme that cannot carry the rush of my words. I elegize and I am the elegized. Be me so I can be you! Rise up so I can carry you! Come near so I can know you! Go far away so I can know you!

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II

. . . .

We were born together on the open road of the chinaberry tree, neither twins, nor neighbors, but one in two and two in one. You choked on your mother's milk so much that none of those sitting under the shade of the mulberry tree believed you would live. You were as skinny as a passing thought, as skinny as a barley plant bereft of love. But March, which has the power to shed the blood of the land in red anemones, adept to save from an early death, which you forget only to remember that life did not come to you on a golden or silver platter. Life did not come to you cheerful and friendly, but rather shyly, like a concubine whose fees have been paid; difficult, sweet, and very obstinate. But the regimen of familiarity is what ultimately makes life possible.

Dodging foxes is possible as well. They were the first of your sly animals, with their green eyes of feminine seduction. . . You fear them, but cannot stay away. As if some force of gravity made you want to leap from high above down a steep slope or into an abyss. Thus, from the outset, the lure of the fox and the abyss inhabited you.

The curiosity of cats, but without their caution, drew you toward danger. Your family was busy chopping tobacco leaves with sharp knives when you took them by surprise and grabbed one and pressed its blade into your left knee. You felt the urge to know if the knife could do to your tender flesh

what it did to tobacco leaves. The gush of red surprised you. You felt no pain until they pulled the knife from your knee, bandaged your wound, and punished you for your recklessness.

Thus, you saw blood for the first time. . . Your blood, which taught you that a scar is a memory that never ceases working. Whenever you looked at it, you smelled the scent of golden tobacco and your grandfather's cloak hanging like a tent in the wind. Whenever you touched the scar, you heard the cry of blood, and ever since you've hated the henna on the hands and feet of brides. You would avert your gaze from the rooster's death dance and from the sheep to be slaughtered for the feast. You never joined your peers in the game of torturing birds.

You dreamt, and still dream up to the last stretch of the dream, that a bird had perched on your hand. You embraced and smelled the bird and the scent of summer wafted from its feathers. You kissed it and then spoke to it: O my brother! Return to your sky! The following night the bird returned to you in a dream.

As if you were my child. As if I were your father. Your father did not pamper you, lest your brothers drop you down into the well of the story. So carry me just as I carried you, so I may gaze, from a distance, at that blue flowing from every distance, purified by space from every blemish. In the story, the field is bigger than what it once was.

I was not a child back then, but I am one now, in a farewell that opens the gate of songs of praise for the past tense upon two planes: lost place and lost time. Place does not become a trap as it becomes an image, for memory has enough wit to root place firmly in place and to arrange trees in harmony with the tune of desire. Not because place is in us even when we are not in it, but because hope, the power of the weak, is difficult to barter. There is enough well-being in hope to travel the long distance from the vast non-place to the narrow place. Time, which we feel only when it is too late, is the trap waiting for us at the edge of the place where we arrive late, unable to dance on the threshold separating beginning from end!

So carry me, just as butterflies carried you to the paths of light, light like them; carry me whenever morning dawns through holes in your wooden door and nameless flying colors pour like scattered heavenly thoughts on fields without an army. There, you thought that the earth flies and dances.

And hence you stood on a rock, opening your arms to the wind and leaping toward the sky to fly. Butterflies surrounded you like sisters to help your ascent, but they did not succeed, although they did guide you into the orbit of azure and trained you in the study of solitude. You drifted away from the house and were alone with trees whose names you could not pronounce, except those that tripped lightly on the tongue: the olive, carob, oak, and chestnut. Of plants you knew only mallow and wild chicory, whose lilac blossoms were the color of your grandmother's eyes.

There, the enchantment of soaring and solitude inhabited you, there, you tried to be born of your dream without grasping the difference between dream and imagination. One evening you snuck from your quiet moment with the tree to the house's southern gate and called to the horse to join you. It obeyed and came out. You halted the enchanting horse by a high rock and leapt upon its smooth bare back. It led you, as the air would lead a cloud, to a slope opening onto an endless field. You spurred it and it flew. The air became wind and you were ecstatic: I am flying. Everything is flying. The trees, earth, plants, directions, and wind are all flying. The only purpose of this flight was the pure joy of flying to the unknown, until night fell upon both known and unknown. The place was blinded. You did not know that you had fallen, but the horse, returning without its young knight, was the one who led your family to the scene of your recklessness. They bandaged the wound on your right eyebrow, then punished you.

As for the scar above your right eyebrow, the one only a woman skilled in scouring a man's heart can see, it remains the memory of a butterfly mimicking an eagle.

There is another scar on your left index finger. You were sitting next to a young girl, two doves perched on two rocks in an olive grove. Let's share

this apple, you proposed as you looked into her eyes and cut your finger with the rusty knife instead of the apple. She was terrified by the blood and ran away as you called after her: Take the whole apple! You tended to your wound with a handful of dirt mixed with dry grass.

As you aged before my eyes, I never asked you why you wound yourself whenever you become absent in a presence. Is it to attract attention, or to let pain get used to the smell of onions?

They called you “mischievous” and you passed this name on to the sparrow. Your twin in tension and your opposite in caution. But you loved its skill in dodging hunters. It has a single nest: trickery. You admired how its color hovered between wheat and light, its agile flight sweeping to great heights in a single flutter and its wily walk among people, fearless, like an informant capable of slipping through a disappointed grip.

They called you “miserable,” because you would cry from happiness or sadness and no one could interpret the sound of wind in the reeds that would soon become neys. What does the ney say? Does it carry the wind’s delirium, or does it convey the shepherd’s joy for the birth of a new lamb, or his fear of a pack of wolves surrounding the herd? The ney draws you into the distance and you cry like one who could anticipate a catastrophe. There are no black clouds on the horizon. *So why do you cry when death is distant and the garden of your house is high, the balcony is high, the willow tree is high, so why do you cry? The Milky Way is clear. Night illuminates you from the locks of your hair down to your toes. And you obey the ney and run. No wolf is howling at night for a moon yellow as a lemon. No ghost is slipping out of the trunk of the olive tree to assassinate your father. Why do you cry? Does your fear of happiness make you cry? I asked you, but I realize that the mountain air pierced with the ney will drop tears we call dew. Tomorrow you will become a magic ney, I said, but you did not hear me. Your wound has not grown yet, so do not leave me in this valley searching for you in vain. You did not hear me!*

And now, as you lie stretched out upon the words, alone and wrapped in lilac and in green and blue, I realize what I never realized before:

At that moment, the future became your approaching past!

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III

. . . .

White letters on a blackboard inspire the awe of dawn in the countryside. Like water poured slowly into a jar that never fills, you absorbed the incomplete form and its sound together by torturing the throat and subjugating it to the power of signs and the mouth to what the eyes take in.

When one letter is brought together with another, that is to say one absurdity with another, an obscure form reveals the clarity of a certain sound. This slow clarity opens a path for meaning to take the shape of an image. Three letters become a door or a house. Thus, lethargic letters, which carry no value when separate, build a house when they come together.

What a game! What magic! The world is gradually born out of words. In this way, school becomes a playground for the imagination . . . and you run to it with the joy of one who is promised the gift of a discovery. Not only to memorize the lesson, but also to rely on the skill of naming things. Whatever is distant comes near. Whatever is sealed opens up. If you do not misspell “river,” the river will flow through your notebook. The sky, too, becomes one of your personal belongings if you do not misspell it.

Whatever is beyond the reach of your tiny hands will fall into them if you master flawless script. He who writes something possesses it. You can smell

the scent of the rose from the final *Tā'* wrapped around itself like a blossoming bud. You can taste its berries from two sides: the connected *Tā'* and the one open like the palm of a hand.

Letters lie before you, so release them from their neutrality and play with them like a conqueror in a delirious universe. Letters are restless, hungry for an image, and the image is thirsty for a meaning. Letters are empty clay jars, so fill them with the sleeplessness of that first conquest. Letters are a mute appeal in pebbles scattered on the open path of meaning. Rub one letter against another and a star is born. Bring a letter close to another and you can hear the sound of rain. Place one letter on top of another and you will find your name drawn like a ladder with only a few rungs.

All letters are ready to receive the form / being in search of a skillful hand to create the need for harmony. You only have to name with your hand beings you knew from before and beings that will introduce themselves to you later.

The letter *Nūn,* as independent as a copper plate big enough to hold a full moon, resonates and longs for fullness, yet is never full. It never stops resonating no matter how far it goes, or how far you go. It will grow in you and you will grow in it. It revives you and drives you away from yourself like a persistent love, and brings you closer to others. The feminine *Nūn,* the plural, the dual, the heart of *anā,* the free wings of *naḥnu.* The *al-Raḥmān* will take you to faith accompanied by ecstasy, so you love God and are cured of the disquiet of the first question: Who created God?

You love poetry, and the rhythm spurred on by the letter *Nūn* takes you into a white night. Words carrying knights away from the love of war in defense of a well, to the war of love in defense of a kidnapped princess in a land of jinns. The story is never right without the trinity of chivalry, poetry, and love. Fates fought over by both sword and poem, and no victory is possible unless the two are together. No tribe has triumphed without a poet and no poet has triumphed unless defeated in love.

When the last guests at your grandfather's gathering depart and he carries you to bed, the tale has already prepared you to dream according to its open imagination. You will follow Antara's wars at times, and al-Muhalhil's at others. You will enter rooms you do not know as one tale begets another in Scheherazade's endless nights. You become part of a tale in a magical world that resembles nothing around you.

Thus the enchantment of rhythms and tales began to inhabit you.

You went far away and were bewildered by the torn thread between reality and imagination, between war narrated and war witnessed.

One evening you saw the neighborhood women coming and going with excitement, carrying on their heads bags filled with rocks that they then stacked on roofs like ammunition. The men were busy hammering nails on the ends of sticks. "What is this?" you asked. You were told: "Tomorrow morning, a war will erupt between the two large clans in the village. We have allies among our kinsmen and they have allies too . . . but we will triumph." You did not ask about the reason for the war. Perhaps it was boredom or a dispute over a tree's shade, or perhaps it grew out of a fib. But the battle, which raged on from morning till evening, did not end in any deaths or a victory. It opened the prison gates for the fighters and closed the gate on bedtime tales in your grandfather's house. You had to cry because of the night's poverty and you had to continue spinning the tales alone and according to your own dreams, without narrators or aides!

As for the white letters on the blackboard, they cracked like rusty limestone because a nightmare had followed you to school: Did my father die? When the teacher asked you: "What does this sentence mean? 'Wait for the car to cross.'" You answered absentmindedly, "It means if you see a car on the street, do not walk until the car blows its horn." The teacher laughed: "What does 'crossing' have to do with 'blowing its horn'?" You replied: "Doesn't the word 'cross' mean 'blow,' if the car has a horn?" He reprimanded you: "'Cross' means 'pass.'" Even now, sixty years after this linguistic blunder, you still hear the horn whenever you hear or read the word "cross." You

laugh to yourself at the ability of our first mistakes to be carved in stone. You ask: When will I be cured of defining the whole by the part? The feather is not the bird, the tree is not the forest, and the threshold is not the house.

But words are beings. The game will so bewitch you that you become part of it. You will spend your life defending the right of the game to lure you into its labyrinth while you lure it toward humor. You read without understanding what you read, so you read more and more, relishing the ability of words to diverge from the ordinary. Words are waves. You learn to swim from the seduction of a wave that wraps you in foam. Words have the rhythm of the sea and the call of the obscure: Come to me in search of what you know not, the blue called out to you. Luck and a coastal guard saved you from a definite detachment from the song of words. The jellyfish continued to sting you, but you never stopped loving the sea, not realizing that it was the source of the primordial rhythm. How can the sea be imprisoned in three letters, the second of which overflows with salt? How can letters take on so many words? How can words have enough space to embrace the world?

Slowly and easily, you grow up. You wish you could leap faster in the race toward a tomorrow where you will tame words and recite zealous poetry, propelled by the power of love and the duty of defending the tribe. That which is secret and hidden opens up as words open up to consciousness. It is not a game, as you had thought, but rather the manifest gazing at the latent and the latent emerging in the manifest. You become words and words become you. You do not know the difference between utterer and utterance. You will call the sea an overturned sky and the well a jar to preserve sound from the wind's tinkering and the sky a sea hanging from clouds.

There is something that assumes the obscure. It cannot be smelled, touched, tasted, or seen. It is what makes childhood a sixth sense. They called you the dreamer because you so often gave words wings invisible to grown-ups. You provoked the obscure and became a stranger.

So rise from this white!

Be a child again. Teach me poetry. Teach me the rhythm of the sea. Return to words their initial innocence. Give birth to me from a grain of wheat, not from a wound. Give birth to me and take me back to a world before meaning, so I can embrace you on the grass. Do you hear me? A world before meaning. The tall trees walked with us as trees, not as meaning. The naked moon crawled with us. A moon, not a silver platter, for meaning. Be a child again. Teach me poetry. Teach me the rhythm of the sea. Take my hand, so we can cross this threshold between night and day together. Together we will learn the first words, and will build a secret nest for the sparrow, our third sibling. Be a child again, so I can see my face in your mirror. Are you I? Am I you? Teach me poetry, so I can elegize you now, now, now. Just as you elegize me!

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IV

. . . .

Night is yours over this valley, so swoop down quicker than a frightened mountain quail. The air is still. It does not ruffle a feather. There is no clearer guide for your departure than a raven accompanying those migrating to the borders of the night.

Night is yours, and there is no longer a place for us, or for you, to remain beneath the olive trees. There is no road beyond the scattered dark shadows of carriages we hear, but do not see. Night is a barrage of megaphones. Night is echo's drum. You have a roaring night, so be calm. Your little name and all of our names are preparing to take off for their random fates in the chaos of genesis.

They rouse you from your private time and tell you: Grow up with us, now, in the time of caravans and run with us lest the wolf devour you. We have no time to bid farewell to anything warm. Let the rest of your dream sleep by an open window so that it can catch up with you when it awakens with the blue dawn. Dreams will find their dreamers and all a dreamer has to do is remember.

So come out with us into this merciless night. Later you will learn how to arrange stars in the closet of memory. How to make up for loss with the power of words and triumph. As for now, do not look at the star lest it

kidnap you, and you would be lost. Hang on to your mother's dress . . . the only proof that the earth runs barefoot. Don't cry like your little brother, born just a few days earlier, lest crying lead the soldiers in our direction, a direction tossed haphazardly into the air.

No one will manage to hide the pain. It is visible, tangible, and audible, like the resounding break of the place. You are there with us watching pain plunder, all at once, everything we have and then pull itself out of us like a knife blade, seated across from us, rejoicing, on the other bank of a river that was once a barrier and now has become a petrified word. Pain keeps us company from a distance and howls like a siren: Come, come to me! We do not go, and we do not return.

We had no need for myths back then, but what happened in them is now happening to us . . . on this day that is being crushed under the chains of a tank. Who will tell our story? We, who walk upon this night, driven out of place and myth. The myth that could not find a single one among us to testify that the crime had not taken place. If we are not we, then they are not they. But particulars are particulars – the thief's pretext.

Therefore do not look for yourself in what is written about you. Do not search for the Canaanite in you to prove that you exist. Grasp your own reality and grasp your name and learn how to write your own proof. You, you and not your ghost, were the one driven out into this night.

Night is yours. Wheat has fathers who are your fathers. The houses have builders, who are your ancestors. Your early wound bears a scream that is you, not another boy whom the arrow of a licentious goddess struck by mistake. So you will write about history, not about myth. It is not up to the women of salt to testify for you or against you. You may seek the aid of mythological gods, as a disguised memory, to protect poetry from the victory of an army over rhythm and over the history of wheat, and to protect time from the strong arm of the present. That the gods are many holds out the possibility of justice for you. Of the past, you have a childhood self that

does not want to age quickly without wisdom. But what remains firmly established is that your name is the name of the land.

The land was fertile with the femininity of Canaanite women, bathing in the plains and hills, camouflaged by anemones, sage, cyclamens, and narcissi bowing over the water with princely splendor.

Canaanite women vaunting the passions of spring. Libidinous Canaanite women, wafting from the whinnies of swift horses and from the ready reed flutes snatching the first melodies of earth fleeing from their sides to springs flowing between their feet.

Here, a name has the resonance of silver, and the stab of stray spears in the sides of Canaanite women who vowed to hang the earth on the horns of stags with the letters of a Semitic alphabet.

Here, names do not bear the sacrifice of the living for the dead, or the forgiveness of the dead for the living. Seduced by chamomile, Canaanite women take the desolate land out of caves back to houses made of rhythms in stone.

Before the sea, we were witnesses to the first apples in our departure from one paradise to another, and we were soldiers with no armor except cornstalks and the supreme power of wheat.

We saw how a shadow grows green and red under Jericho's sun. We saw how it turns white from the tenderness of our warm greeting. Our rustic greeting treading lightly between our first fire and our undelivered tidings.

From one wind to another

Our peace, spread out like eternal blue on a land covering its feminine wound with fig leaves and the wool of sheep heading without bells to spring waters.

Our peace, exposed like the scandalous scent of ripe fruit on wedding nights.

So bathe, O Canaanite women, in water, light, and basil, to fill the place with a femininity that runs after a herd of goats. The peppers too will swell like goat udders and crane, bearing witness to the peace of joy and scorching thighs stained with the sticky sap of grapes.

Swim, O Canaanite women, swim in warm light, so that a poet's poem may overflow with the legacy of pure water before the invasion. A poet who was not born on the road of this departure, but was born from time immemorial, when Adam met Eve to entertain eternity. A poet who with his ancestors was not born, but on this land named after you and bloodied with the thorns of flowers you planted.

We had no need for myths except to explain the relationship between the moon and menstruation, between the sun and the seasons, and to add magic to our talk on long winter nights and to train beasts to obey music.

So memorize this night of hurt by heart. You may well be the narrator, the narrative, and the narrated. Do not forget this narrow winding road that carries you, and that you carry, toward the boisterous unknown, that will cast doubts upon you and your people.

You ask: What is the meaning of "refugee"?

They will say: One who is uprooted from his homeland.

You ask: What is the meaning of "homeland"?

They will say: The house, the mulberry tree, the chicken coop, the beehive, the smell of bread, and the first sky.

You ask: Can a word of eight letters be big enough for all of these, yet too small for us?

You grow up quickly hearing big words, you grow up at the edge of a world falling apart behind you, and yet to form before you, a world tossed like a stray stone in the game of fates. You ask yourself: Who am I? You do not know how to define yourself. You are still too young for a question that perplexes philosophers. But the weighty question of identity halts the butterfly's flight.

You retreat to a distant corner on a deserted rock on the Lebanese shore. You weep like a prince brought down from his childhood throne before being taught the gradual jurisprudence of adulthood and the geography lesson necessary to chart the distance between "here" and "there":

O sea, O sea! You don't succeed in forming an adequate call. But the letter *Ḥā'* initiates the mouth with salt's grit: O sea, O sea! You cry and some of the salt rising to the eyes melts and the direction of the call grows clearer: O sea, O sea, take me there!

A white bird approaches you. A magical seabird gently descends and wraps its wings around you and gathers you in like one of its young. It takes off and flies at a low altitude. You know not whether you are the bird, or one of its attributes. You fly together along the winding coast that shifts between green and blue. You both alight painlessly in the courtyard of the house that stands like a mother upon the hill. The window is still open. The white bird spreads its wings out gently on your bed and you sleep lightly as if on a cloud. But loud voices suddenly wake you: What are you doing here, you foolish boy? How can you sleep on such a night on this deserted rock by the sea? Have you no home or family? You realize that you were dreaming.

You have a splendid dream that precedes poetry

and a sea call that precedes rhythm

As if tonight were the private rendezvous

between creator and created:

Be the master of your attributes now

My son, you have a dream

Follow it with the night given to you!

And be one of the dream's attributes

Dream and you will find paradise in place!

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V

. . . .

Darkness, darkness, darkness. The flight of colors from interpretation, an imagination that offers the night-blind what was missed in dictation, and an equality giving preference to error. Were the night devoid of us, those hunting ghosts would have returned to their barracks empty-handed. Were the night devoid of them, we would have returned safely to our homes.

The trees are black and blind without name or shadow. There is a secret in every stone. As if death, whom you had not seen before, were laying its traps with quiet cunning. What would you have done in this utter wilderness had this little convoy missed a single being? Which way would you have fled and where would your flight have taken you? Where would you have taken it without knowing the roads? What would you have done had you reached safety?

Still too young, you could not imagine your own death. You did not yet grasp that children too could die. But how to go alone toward an unfamiliar life, in an unfamiliar place. That dilemma, burying you mercilessly beneath a heavy sky, made you weep. It ruthlessly narrated to you the end of a tale about an eternal loss in a brutal night falling on two mules, a rocky road, a merchant of longing guiding five people retracing their steps.

You will tell no one whose features you can distinguish: We had no enemy at that time except light and sound. That night we had no ally but luck. The soft voice of fear reprimands you: Do not cough, boy, because coughing leads death to its destination! Do not light a match, father, because a glimpse of your little flame will attract a barrage of bullets.

You thought that this night was death's wide tent and that you were walking, crawling, or hopping, like a grasshopper in a wilderness of wolves where no one walks. You thought the light coming from a fleeting star, or a distant car, was a secret guide with the owner of the wilderness. When a distant light appeared, you had to take the shape of a shrub or a tiny rock and hold your breath, lest the slandering light hear you.

When I master writing, you will tell me, or tell no one, how on that night you found antennae ready to receive distant messages. How you trained yourself to reside in adventure, how you were burned by the embers of dualities, and how you struggled to endure opposites. You avoided defining a thing by its opposite, because the opposite of wrong is not always right. Homeland is not always daylight and exile is not night . . .

A darkness uniting elements in the unadorned cave of existence. The unknown, carried by the howling of wolves and the whispers of bloody grass, overflows. You take a step on black thoughts and then on night's stone. You ask yourself, what makes darkness so rough and life so tough. You long for rain in the south; a rain that melts this immense universal ink and you say: Had rain fallen on us that night, darkness would have dissolved and we would have seen our steps and seen the road. The scent of rain would have led us to the trees that grew in our absence and whose high branches had burst into rooms.

But a salty whisper orders you to lie down on the ground. It is the hyena, they tell you as they point to headlights in the distance. They do not allow you to ask: Does the hyena drive a car? You did not know what figurative language was, so you did not know that the hyena was the "border guard." They thought the hyena was kinder to your peers. It did not carry a gun and

could not argue. All you had to do to escape from it was hide your fear in your pocket and nonchalantly stroll on. The light goes away; you swallow the fear, and, guided by darkness, walk with two mules, a family, and a merchant of longing.

I, the narrator, not you, now remind you of the village crier who used to sit on top of a roof and call out: The hyena is coming! Dozens like you ran to the village cave until the soldiers had left after completing their search for those who returned to their country as "infiltrators." That village, carved into a mountainside, had houses with three walls, the fourth being the mountain's back. Were you to look at them from the olive grove below, you would see a chance painting hastily done, stone by stone, by a blind artist. He forgot to grace it with a bit of color, because he was afraid he would suddenly see what his hands had done. And the windows all gaze out at the hyena!

There, you learned enough of the Nakba's destructive effects to cause you to hate the second half of your childhood. One wool sweater alone is not enough to befriend the winter. You will look for warmth in your books, escaping the mire into an imagined world, ink on paper. And songs you could only hear from the neighbors' radio. Dreams would not find room in a mud house, hastily built like a chicken coop with seven dreamers crowded inside – none of whom would call the others by name since names had become numbers. Speech, dry gestures to be exchanged only when absolutely necessary, such as when you lose consciousness from malnutrition and are treated with fish oil, the civilized world's gift to those driven out of their homes. You are forced to drink it, just as you force pain to swallow its voice by feigning contentment.

You remember the sharp bite of the honey your grandfather would force you to eat, but you would refuse and run away when your grandmother slipped on her beekeeper's mask to harvest honey with an audacious hand. Everything here is proof of loss and lack. Everything here is a painful reminder of what had once been there. What wounds you most is that "there" is so close to "here." A neighbor forbidden to visit. You look at your

life carried on by Yemeni immigrants without interfering in what they do to it. They have a divine right; you are the itinerant, the refugee.

When you say to your family: I have never tasted anything worse than fish oil in my life, the elders ridicule you: Do you even have a life yet, you are still seven, do you have memories? You say: Yes. And that is the difference. The past was born suddenly, like mushrooms. You have a past that you see as distant. Distant is the house that the past alone inhabits. The past was born out of absence. The past calls on you with all it possesses; from the yellow cacti by the road climbing the hills and from the scent of longing that resembles the smell of chestnuts roasted in braziers. It calls on you from your grandfather's *'abā'ah,* brown as wet tobacco, streaming like the sound of a friendly struggle between wisdom and absurdity. The past was born, like the teats of a bitch about to give birth. Out of your fear of tomorrow. The past was born, able and ready to kidnap the bride and ride the tale's horse. Out of all that you feel, out of all the misery of the present, which hungers for your identity to be defined . . . the past was born.

You said, as if delirious: Happy is the distant one and distant is the happy one. I will make this night an antinomy to retrieve the past's well-being and remedy the fever that swept the land growing in me like grass. I am delirious and I know it. In a delirious state, the patient is conscious of his vision, because it is the most noble level of pain.

The doctor will say again: He is suffering from malnutrition. Did he stop taking fish oil? No, but he remembers things no one his age could bear. He wants to be a butterfly. Do butterflies have memories? Butterflies are memories for those who master singing next to springs. Has he sung? He is still young. How can he roll out speech on a sandy workbench? He suffers from the malady of the present, so take him to tomorrow.

There is nothing we can do and there is no tomorrow, they said, when we are in this state, bound to firm fates, tied to abyss after abyss. We take water from the neighbors' wells and borrow bread from the rock's bounty. We live, if we are able to live, in an infant past, planted in fields that were ours

for hundreds of years until a moment ago, before the dough rose and the coffeepots cooled. In one ill-fated hour, history entered like a bold thief through a door as the present flew out through a window. With a massacre or two, the country's name, our country, became another. Reality became an idea and history became memory. The myth invades and the invasion attributes everything to the will of the Lord who promised and did not renege on his promise. They wrote their narrative: We have returned. They wrote our narrative: They have returned to the desert. They put us on trial: Why were you born here? We said: Why was Adam born in paradise?

Remember yourself

before all turns to dust

so that you may grow up

Remember, remember

your ten toes and forget the shoe

Remember the features of your face

Forget the winter fog

Remember your mother and your name

and forget the letters of the alphabet

Remember your country and forget the sky

Remember, remember!

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VI

. . . .

You lived, because a divine hand carried you from the eye of the storm to a barren valley. You lived at zero, perhaps less, perhaps more. You lived with a recalcitrant heart, rarely looking back at what pains and makes pain itself a direction, or to the echo of bells that makes a place ripe for travel: gypsy women struck by the fever of dancing and seduction passed through here. They hung their underwear on tree branches and put on nudity camouflaged in elegant motion. Imagination, alone, must see the scandal of nudity in art's faith in its laconic self. Gypsy women, skilled at slipping lightning into the bones of onlookers, are the ones who can cover nudity with a light shining from breasts that drip laughing water.

In every boy there is a gypsy woman. In every gypsy woman there is an improvised inner journey. In every journey there is a secret tale told only after memory passes the age of shyness. Is this why you carried gypsies along with you whenever place was separated from time, and whenever place was scattered in its inhabitants searching for it in traces of scents that prove the sensuality of the soul? Is this why you searched in strange women for the body's chaos churning in the lust of gypsy women dancing on the wind's ropes, and why you accompanied love's unadorned meaning to the end of absurdity?

You lived, because a divine hand saved you from an accident. You lived everywhere like a traveler in an airport terminal sending you, like airmail, to another airport. An itinerant crisscrossing the fusion of the “here” with the “there.” A visitor freed from the task of having to ascertain anything. Thus, gypsy women passed through the field of your distant days on their vagrant way from India to thoughts that occur, without maps or identities, when feeling lost in the labyrinth. Beautiful, miserable, dancing for no reason but the kinship of hot blood and rhythm. They are what they are; a flock of tents migrating to an adventure where they might find a living within reach. They never bid farewell to anything lest they feel sad, because for them sadness is an unsuitable profession. They have been sad since the day they were born. They dance so as not to die. They leave yesterday behind them; a handful of ashes from a temporary fire. They do not think of tomorrow, lest expectation disturb the purity of improvisation. Today, today is all of time.

Beware of the path of gypsy women: it leads nowhere.

You lived, because many stray bullets flew between your arms and legs and missed your heart, just as a reckless rock did not wound your head. You lived, because the truck driver noticed, the last moment, a screaming boy between the truck and the wall to which you were clinging. You lived, because another driver saw a white shirt at the edge of the road in the dark. He saved you from the night’s danger, and took you back to your family, who were busy roasting assumptions over the embers of their fears. You lived, because moonlight pierced the water and lit up sharp rocks that convinced you death would not be a lovely swim in the waters of eternity, but quite painful were you to leap from that rock into the sea.

You lived without knowing how to formulate simple expressions of gratitude: Praise, praise be to life! You asked belatedly: How many times did I die without noticing? Whenever you did notice, you devoured life like a peach, because there is not much time to fear the unknown as long as life, a female, is too busy to notice the dead, always renewing its youth, depravity, and piety, in full view of the deprived.

You sit in a distant corner at the airport restaurant and wonder about the purpose of the journey: Am I going or coming back? No one is waiting for me when I go and there is no reason for me to return. I have more than one name and date of birth on passports bound in glamorous red, blue, and green. I am free in this itinerant crowd, safe – like duty-free items – and protected by electronic alarms. No one asks me: "Who are you?" and no one notices my stuttering walk, the missing button on my coat, or the oil stain on my shirt. As if I were a runaway from one of the novels on display at the newspaper stand. Running away from the writer, the reader, and the seller. I can add, delete, edit, change, kill, be killed, walk, sit, fly, be what I want, love, hate, ascend, descend, even fall off mountaintops and not be hurt, because I do not transgress the writer's rights, and I have a different perspective regarding fate, my fate.

No one at the airport forbade you to stray too far from the author's discipline. So you went on hammering the known against the steel of the unknown. Sparks flew forth from an imagination, which, whenever walls closed in on it, radiated like broken crystal in a prisoner's metaphor. You saw your self at the next airport a persona non grata because documents lack the logic linking geography to names: He who was born in a country that does not exist . . . does not exist either. If you say, metaphorically, that you are from no place, you are told: There is no place for no place. If you tell the passport official: No place is exile; he answers: We have no time for rhetoric, so if you like rhetoric, go to another no place.

You see yourself at a third, fourth, and tenth airport explaining to disinterested employees a lesson in contemporary history about the people of the Nakba, scattered between exile and military occupation, without them understanding or granting you permission to enter. You see yourself in a long film slowly narrating what befell your people whose tongue, wheat, houses, and proof of existence were stolen the moment the gigantic bulldozer of history descended upon them and drove them away, leveling the place according to the dimension of a sacred myth, armed to the teeth. Whoever was not in the myth at that time will not be now. You wondered: Is there a sacred executioner? You saw yourself carrying on with what

remained of your life without historians and authors in an airport crowded with those rushing to their meetings and rendezvous.

You are the one devoid of meetings and farewells. You sit in the leather seat and sleep. You wake up, because a rushing traveler stumbled over you and apologized without looking. You go to the bathroom and wash your underwear and socks and shave, then you go to the cafeteria to have a cup of coffee and look for any recent developments in newspapers: Is there a country that will accept me? All you find are detailed reports of wars, earthquakes, and floods in the newspapers. Perhaps God is angry because of what humans are doing to earth. Perhaps earth is pregnant with Apocalypse!

What does it mean for a human being to live in an airport? You think: Were I in my shoes, I would have written in praise of my freedom at the airport: *The fly and I are free. My sister, the fly, is compassionate. She lands on my shoulder and hands. She reminds me of writing, then flies off, and I write a line. As if the airport were a homeland for those without one. The fly returns after a while. She erases the monotony and then flies off. I cannot speak to anyone. Where is my sister, the fly? Where am I?*

You see yourself in a film gazing at a woman sitting across from you at the cafeteria. When she sees you watching her, you pretend to be wiping away a drop of wine that fell on your shirt like a renegade word from what you might have told her had she been with you: This beauty of yours is too much for me, like a sky, so please lift the sky a bit so I might speak. You lift your eyes from the steaming bowl of soup and see that she is watching you. But she then pretends to be busy sprinkling salt on her food with a hand on which light trembles. You converse with her silently: If only you were, like me, banned from leaving, if only you were like me! You feel that you've embarrassed her so you pretend to be talking to the waiter: No, sorry. A pearl of sweat glitters on her neck, which rises for praise. You tell her in secret: If I were with you, I would lick that drop of sweat. Desire is as apparent and visible as the plate, fork, spoon, knife, bottle of water, tablecloth, and the table's legs. The air is fragrant. The two glances meet, are embarrassed, and separate. She takes a sip from the wine glass in which

the pearl has dissolved. You feel that she has heard the whale's weeping in a deep ocean. Otherwise, what could be drowning her in this dense silence? You privately tell her: If they announce that a bomb is about to explode in the airport, do not believe it! I am the one spreading this rumor to approach you and say that I, and no one else, am the one who has spread this rumor. You think she is reassured, and as she raises her glass to your health, a thread of desire slips from her fingertips and sends an electric current through your spinal cord. A shiver jolts you. You are enraptured and sigh. The scent of mango wafts from a secret bed hanging in the air. Mournful violins cry in the distance, their strings relax after the exhilaration.

You do not look at her, because you know that she is looking at you, yet does not see you. Fog has enveloped your table, now drowsy under all the interpretive instruments you have piled on it, and all the white sheets twenty authors would not be able to fill with metonymy. It was not the waiter but rather she who broke your swoon and asked: Was your meal good? And yours? you asked her. She said: Pleased to meet you . . . did you remember me? You said: One might lose one's memory in airports. She said: Goodbye! You did not look at her as she walked away, because you preferred not to see desire knocking, with two high heels, on the marble of cathedrals and rousing a lust for departure in the bodies of violins. But you remembered her when sleepiness slipped in, like the numbing of wine, upon your body, moving from the knees to that patch you do not recall in the body's forest. As for her name, you might know it tomorrow, at another table, at another airport.

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VII

. . . .

Prison is density. No one spends a night there without training his throat on what resembles singing, for that is the way one is allowed to tame solitude and preserve the dignity of pain. To hear your own hoarse voice means that your other has spent the night with you and whispered your personal news to you in a room. The narrower it becomes, the wider what lies beyond it grows. You embrace the world, infatuated with reconciliation.

And you, when you sing, you do not sing to share the night with someone. Nor do you sing to measure the rhythm of a time without sign or rhythm. You sing, because the prison cell tempts you to speak of what you lack in perfect solitude to the world outside: Fields come to you with the rustling of golden ears of wheat. The sun fills your heart with the light of oranges. The flowers on slopes, tousled like the hair of a wild girl, come to you. The aroma of coffee charged with the exhilaration of cardamom comes to you. As if you had never noticed before all the vastness and gentleness that exists outside and the celebration of nature that you lacked.

Just as in poems and at dusk, obscurity celebrates clarity, because a secret focal point emits its rays in directions and words and deprives darkness of the eternity of attributes. Tiny memories visit you in a herd of goats while stags leap like pinecones on a mountain road. In every song there is a girl

waiting at a bus station or on a balcony. On every balcony there is a handkerchief waving and a dove seeking refuge.

You are you, and more.

You are inhabited, like a housing complex, by those climbing the stairs and those going down to the street. Inhabited by kitchen utensils, washing machines, and the quarrels of married couples over the best way to peel potatoes and fry fish. A stomach cramp is followed by a metaphysical cramp: Do angels get colds?

You are you, and less.

You cannot enter a new day without a shower, a shave, a newspaper, and a cup of coffee. The expanse of the earth here is two meters, with a permanently shut iron door. The stocky sound of shoes bringing you lentil soup cooked with weevils. You realize that a new day has arrived. But you do not count days, because there are no beads or pebbles for the new calendar in your cell. You do not know if a new war has erupted, or if the old one has ended. You do not know if your clothes have stopped giving off their smell, or if your sense of smell has dulled.

Nothing new, then. Nothing new in this solid break with time. Nothing new except your past crawling out of you and then back toward you, alternating without skill between thoughts and images, trying to instill in you the indispensable calm needed to breathe in this rotten air naturally. Nothing is at the beck and call of the heart, which would command you and you would obey, and would then command you to disobey, and you would. It would take you to the ends of the wilderness to chase a mountain quail and to the cruelest of words in the brusqueness of invective.

You are so calm you are able to say: Invective is the virility of language that can lock horns with stones, whenever nightingales stop singing and a crossbred horse yields to the temptation of a donkey. Invective is defeated chivalry that compensates for the inability to resemble the victor by raising

the rhetoric of the loser to the throne. But invective intoxicates the angry audience and tortures the winner with the drone of kids that stalk him with clanging and curses. It deprives him of crowning victory with ecstasy.

You are almost you.

Neither a prisoner nor a free man, because prison is density. No one has spent a night in it without spending the whole night rubbing the muscles of freedom, sore from loitering so frequently on sidewalks, exposed, naked, and hungry. Here you are embracing it from every side, free and liberated from the burden of proof. How small it is, how simple, and so swift to respond to the agility of a mirage. It is in you, within reach of the hand with which you knock at the walls of the cell. It is in you, borrowing the bird's example, in the falling of rain, the blowing of winds, the laughter of light upon a forgotten rock, in the pride of a beggar who reprimands his benefactors when they are stingy, in an unequal dialogue with your jailer when you say to him:

You, not I, are the loser. He who lives on depriving others of light drowns in the darkness of his own shadow. You will never be free of me unless my freedom is generous to a fault. Then it would teach you peace and guide you home. You, not I, are afraid of what the cell is doing to me. You who guard my sleep, dream, and a delirium mined with signs. I have the vision and you have the tower, the heavy key chain, and a gun trained on a ghost. I have sleepiness, with its silky touch and essence. You have to stay up watching over me lest sleepiness take the weapon from your hand before your eye can see it. Dreaming is my profession while yours is pointless eavesdropping on an unfriendly conversation between my freedom and me.

The jailer does not listen to you or see you as you take him unawares to enter yourself like a stranger entering a sidewalk café. Rumor has it that you do not like cafés or nightclubs. The café is where the novelist is filled with the curiosity of a text thirsty to observe fates. The café rids time of the boredom thirsty for gulps of gossip. Boredom is humiliating, like desire erupting out of place. The café is the open snare of lost memories that

patrons leave behind along with tips they leave on the tables and of inaccurate snatches from cultural headlines that resemble fast-food meals.

But now you feel a burning desire to leave your cell for the café. You would sit alone with a cup of coffee and a newspaper that you would read and then immediately forget. Or you might not read it yet still remember what you had read. It is a paper curtain over which to peek at others: A lady speaking to her dog with familial affection. A general eating ravenously, for the general, too, is a hungry creature. A coquettish young woman bringing a lock of hair down onto her forehead as she waits. A journalist jotting down notes describing a man sitting across from him trying to solve a crossword puzzle. And when you peek at yourself, you discover that you are not thinking of anything, not waiting for anyone, and you feel no emptiness, sickness, or boredom.

The light is brilliant, so you go out to the street that descends from the pine-covered mountaintops to the sea. Prison deprives one of the sight of a tree and the sea. Freedom is the imagination capable of recalling them both in prison, making the invisible visible. No, that is what poetry does. Poetry, then, is an act of freedom. It makes what is visible invisible when facing danger. Walking is exercise and freedom. You imagine that you are walking down your own private street, slowly at first. You enjoy windows opening onto the interior, to tiny secrets and bathrooms. You measure the distance between a long encounter and a short farewell. You are struck with a sour feeling of regret for a mistake you did not commit: You are not responsible for what happened. But the war took each of us back to his tent. You, to your national anthem, and I, to prison. The song of two bodies is no longer shared.

Walking is exercise and freedom. You imagine that you are taking a brisk walk on your own private street. Brisk, to burn off the extra calories of the shawarma sandwich and chocolate bars. Prisoners crave fat and sugar in an attempt to retrieve a state of normality. Walking is a verbal exercise that trains the memory to forget insults it needs to forget. Brisk walking shaves the fat from adjectives and synonyms from words and all that makes the

arrow go astray. Brisk walking places the symbolic in the bulls'-eye of the real, no matter how much the fog may blur the concept and vision. Brisk walking squeezes speech into a slender cypress under a clear sky. Hurry up before the jailer stops you from exercising your metaphors in the middle of this wide street. Hurry up before he wakes you and tosses the morning piss pot over to you!

You are you and not you at the same time.

You are divided into an interior that exits and an exterior that enters. But you are free in being alone with a freedom that can only be interpreted in a single manner. Free to put imagination on your lap. You do not compare, as is often done, a big prison to a small one, because nothing in the cell distracts you from gazing at a black center that radiates light, so you sing to the light and fly, as a mystic does, farther than the hoopoe, to the ends of the question!

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VIII

. . . .

The lotus-eaters did not enchant you with the honey taste of forgetfulness. They safely slipped from their myth while you and your kin entered the labyrinth unprepared. You know exactly what you left behind: a past, not recorded in songs about the new Trojans, of whom nothing is told save what their enemies relate. But they did not kidnap Helen and cause the war. They were kind and peaceful, their only crime was being born on slopes that were compared to the ladders to God. They were courageous without swords, spontaneous without rhetoric, so they were broken before the rolling tanks, displaced and scattered in the wind without losing their faith that one day history's wound would heal.

So who are you on this journey? A Trojan poet who escaped the massacre in order to tell the story, or a mixture of that and a Greek who lost his way home? The enchantment of myth makes you susceptible to choosing metaphors, so take what fits the rise of song to another end, deep enough for the lost voice of the Trojan victim and for the failure of the Greeks' victory to restore youth to their warrior, prematurely aged by the yoke of home and road.

Taut, like a string drawn between yesterday and tomorrow, you know all you have lost and left behind. You cannot see what lies ahead clearly. But a horizontal gravity thrusts you into the thick of tomorrow, to an enchanting

unknown in an unfinished poem you are about to begin. Then it will take charge of its course, for what is created overpowers its creator, and the newborn overpowers the mother. They called you a dreamer when you said that a Trojan does not surrender. They interpreted your dreams even before you had them. You said: I stepped away in order to be near. They said: This is how the nostalgic speak, do you regret this journey? You said: I do not know, because I am still at the beginning of the road.

You had to choose the margin to know where you stand. The margin is a window looking out on the world. You are neither in it, nor outside it. The margin is a cell without walls. The margin is a personal camera that selects the images it wants from the scene, so that the king is not the king and David's slingshot is nothing but Goliath's weapon. Is it true that the first one to write his story will win the land of the story? But writing requires claws to carve into rock.

They called you a dreamer when you drew the boundaries of your dream, which grasped your devotion to remembering your old name that stalks you like a mute shadow. If the shadow could speak, it would have guided me, you once said. As for me, I went to the streets to chant and bleed, to chant for the fall of pretexts and reasons until I thought I was free, had freed myself, and had atoned for sins I had not committed. You would look at me from the margin because the distance between us, as you had told me, was a sieve and a mirror. In the evening we met, as usual, and you embraced me and patted my shoulder saying: I will go with you tomorrow, because the margin contemplates but cannot act.

The road rises and falls, undulates, zigzags, extends, and branches off into countless roads that meet back at the beginning. How many times must we start from the beginning? We survived much death. We defeated forgetfulness and you said to me: We survive, but do not triumph. I said to you: Survival is the prey's potential triumph over the hunter. Steadfastness is survival and survival is the beginning of existence. We persevered and much blood flowed on the coasts and in the deserts. Much more blood than what the name needed for its identity, or what identity needed for its name.

We searched for our national flower and could not find anything better than anemones, which the Canaanites called “the lover’s wounds.” We searched for our national bird and chose the Sunbird, because its resurrection from the ashes was a good omen, and to avoid any confusion with the “Phoenician” brethren. We searched for our national flag and our pan-Arab horizon guided us to the verse that showered the four colors with descriptions contradicting what was being described, but that incited zeal.

And so much blood flowed that tracking blood, our blood, became the enemy’s reassuring guide, afraid of what he had done to us, not of what we might do to him. We, who have no existence in “the Promised Land,” became the ghost of the murdered who haunted the killer in both wakefulness and sleep, and the realm in-between, leaving him troubled and despondent. The insomniac screams: Have they not died yet? No, because the ghost reaches the age of being weaned, then comes adulthood, resistance, and return. Airplanes pursue the ghost in the air. Tanks pursue the ghost on land. Submarines pursue the ghost in the sea. The ghost grows up and occupies the killer’s consciousness until it drives him insane:

Israel’s new king sits on the balcony of a psychiatric institute, looking out on the remains of Dayr Yasin, and hallucinates: Here, here is the beginning of my miracle. Here I killed them and saw them dead. I saw and heard them die. Here I heard the wailing of human beasts, which did not disturb my music. From here, to terrify the rest of the herd muddying the waters of the holy land, I scatter their voices northward. From here I spread fright among what remains of the bipeds . . . to make them begin the journey into the wilderness. No, no, “wilderness” is not the appropriate word for their fate. Wilderness is my specialty. Wilderness leads to guidance. Wilderness leads to return. Wilderness is my monopoly, just as God is. The king takes tranquilizers and remembers: Were it not for my heroism, for what I did to Dayr Yasin, my kingdom would not have been established. Were it not for absence, their absence, I would not be present. For them not to be, is for me to be. Whence did they emerge when I did not accept them as neighbors or slaves, woodchoppers or water carriers? The king clenches his glass of water nervously and crushes it. A trickle of blood flows from his hand and

he starts to hallucinate: I did not see the blood of the ghost that my army is pursuing in Lebanon, yet I see my own blood! I killed them and saw them dead here, so how did they cheat death and disobey my orders, when I am the one who bestows life and death? I am the king, the new king of Israel. How have the dead become ghosts and how can ghosts defy me? Is this a dream or a nightmare? Is there no balcony in this world looking out on a different end? Take Dayr Yasin away from me again, take the cries of these ghosts away, or take me away from them. For I cannot apologize to them, nor do I want to! O Hiram, Hiram, king of Tyre, save me! My people have become angry with me. They say that my war is a waste, that killing the ghost is a waste, that my peace is a waste. O Hiram, Hiram, save me, even if with a false peace, to numb my mind, my heart, and my people, and be cured of my sorrows. Do you not know me? Do you not hear me, you son of a dog! No one listens to the king secluded in his house looking out on the scene of his first crime. When he goes out leaning on a cane to visit his wife's grave, he does not speak to a soul. The ghost is his sole companion, his enemy who will not leave him. His enemy who returns in his delirium and guides him to their first encounter: You killed me right here and buried me in this pit. He cannot ward him off. He collapses: the murderer falls into the grave of the murdered!

I asked you: What does this mean? You said to me: Meaning might need another time to ripen in the earth's salt. It might need another poet free of Trojans and Greeks, a poet who gazes into an abyss from above without falling in, and the abyss becomes a lake. As for now, a hand waving from afar is meaning enough: We are still alive and capable of amending the Greek text. The last chapter, the ending, has endless possibilities!

Figurative language, metonymy, metaphor, allusion

are the shadows of speech

The object's image is neither like the object, nor its opposite

It is poetry's ruse in naming

And I have other aims in metaphor

such as letting the song
go at its gentle pace
turning east and west
leaping from sky to valley
and treating its aches
with some irony

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IX

. . . .

I asked you, but a shell searching for an evasive target interrupted me. We went down to a shelter and I asked you with a cunning you knew I had: When will the ships set sail? You said lightheartedly: Whereto? I said: To the unknown. To a new unknown. Is that not the path of meaning? You did not like my misplaced irony, as if I had been laughing at a funeral, or weeping at a wedding. You looked away, walked off, and disappeared. You listened to the voice inside you calling and needling you whenever you reached a crossroads or an incline: Why, why did I come down from Mount Carmel? You did not believe those who believed you. They treated you as one might treat a bird that fell from its flock with a broken wing. They nursed you and taught you to fly, little by little, and so you did. They taught you how to sing and you sang, and said: I am what I will be.

In magical Cairo, that stays up late, you dream you are in paradise. You get up at night and open the window to establish the existence of eternity whenever you see the Nile. But why did you come down from Mount Carmel? The question is absent for others, but present in you alone, secret and hidden like the phantom pains awakened by a severed body part. So you say: That's enough! and you go back to sleep.

My question wakes you up: When will the ships set sail? You answer with a nervousness that lures meaning into absurdity: I will not leave! I remind

you that Beirut is not Haifa. You had to say that there. You are ashamed of patching one mistake with another, so you add: I mean I will not leave by sea, because I cannot swim. I tease you a bit: But all your poetry is measured by the sea's cadence, yet you do not know the sea? You calm down and say: The sea is a bed of aquatic metaphors. The sea is a linguistic spectacle. The sea is rhythm.

We surfaced from the shelter to streets devoid of pedestrians or mortar. A deafening truce. The sky has been cleared of aircraft and filled with a dewy blue. You can count heartbeats now in the agonizing farewell to a revolution searching farther and farther for a path, to reach its land, which is just an apple's throw away. I asked you: Did you go far away to be near, or did you come near to be distant? You said: The weather is not ideal for throwing salt on wounds or dissecting allusions.

You cried like never before. You cried with all your senses. You cried as if you were not crying, but melting all at once and raining. So I gathered you up and carried you to your tiny apartment on the eighth floor of a building that looks out to the sea where the ships will sail. Everything was crying. The low sky. The bullets bidding farewell to the fighters were crying. The streets were crying. Balconies, ruined buildings, slogans on city walls were crying. Rendezvous cast into the realm of the possible and impossible were crying.

I left you and went out to cast a farewell gaze on those who were trained to hide their tears and who waved their guns smiling. I was pained by the heroes' victory signs raised by hands whose missing parts they had not noticed. I heard chants accompanying heroism to new beginnings. An idea is an ember. The path is the search for the right path. We will survive and triumph. I can no longer weep. Anger has scorched my tears. I can no longer look at the present, because zeal has lifted me to its highest paths and tomorrow's sun has illuminated my tunnels. As if I were stronger than myself as long as the beginning remains alive in us, and so long as there is enough of the cloud's density when it drips and rains to water a desert. Such are the traces of injustice in us that we need not seek justice with the

elucidating eloquence of the tongue. The sea is no longer unknown and the howling of sailing ships has ceased. I cry out: From every port we begin.

When I returned to you and saw the gray-green in two translucent eyes, I asked you: Do you like the hamza at the end of words? You answered: I like it wherever it falls and I don't like your question, please go away, because I miss the silence!

Beirut sleeps, dreaming of another day. Tomorrow it will count its dead and wounded. You lie down on a deafening silence. A universal silence, loaded with savage desolation. It rises and falls, an echo of an echo of a sky stripped of the howling of steel. As if hearing water dripping from a leaky tap. Or listening to footsteps approaching the door, but never arriving. Silence has gossiping walls, emptiness slandering emptiness. Silence has the sound of darkness that oozes and spills with the awe of an army in secret locations. Silence has the whispering sound of a sense eyeing, between sleep and wakefulness, the task of another sense. Silence is a garrulous stuttering among elements that have not yet mastered speech. Silence is the laughter of a storm that reaches us after having successfully completed its absurd task. Silence is a humming that turns the bedroom into a thicket of ghosts.

You scream and scream to break this obstinate silence with a louder silence, but silence is defeated, then it returns with the help of insomnia's tyranny. You light a candle and lead silence to the door: This way out. You may depart for your permanent place: the world's conscience. It obeys you and takes off, leaving insomnia in its wake. And that is another matter caused by the mutual misunderstanding between consciousness and body parts and by the immutable misunderstanding between reality and imagination. But you are used to solving it with cunning as you tell reality: You are only a figment, and tell imagination: You are the only reality I can depend on.

And you slept. You fell in love with your body, and it fell in love with you. The pleasant numbness of exhaustion enters your pores one by one. A flock of seagulls flutters over you, flapping low over the sea's song to the ships.

A poignant song looking back to a departing land and to a time departing like a superfluous text recorded by a superfluous people without book or land. Suddenly, the seagulls shed their whiteness and become gray and black. Their blackness deepens and they become predatory birds that pounce on children sleeping out in the open, snatching them with arched claws, the children screaming with fear and pain. They scream and then their horror, pain, and cries cease in the belly of the beast.

The nightmare strikes you with its iron fist. You scream without a voice. You check the body parts the nightmare severed with the skill of a butcher and find them whole, but they shiver and shriek from the effects of the slaughter. You try to get out of bed to find out where you were killed, but you see no blood in the room. You look for your face in the mirror, your feet in your shoes, your hand around the glass of water, your heart under the shirt. Your traces, not your life, prove to you that you are alive, or that you are a dead man who has found himself alive.

You and dawn are lonely. Lonely and on the street. The bakery is closed, the vendors gone, the doors shut. There are no cats in the street, which is heaped with trash. The solitary tree stands at the door of the building to greet the dawn bringing news of an eternity of no interest to anyone at this superfluous hour. You and dawn are two lonely strangers who have met against their will, without congeniality or curiosity. You know not where you are walking but retrace old footsteps until dawn pours out its kohl blue and departs. You confess that you have erred: Why did I come down from Mount Carmel yet not continue the journey with my brothers to the sea, to the unknown?

You see a giant tank in the middle of the street and you know not whether to retreat or keep on walking as if you did not see what you saw. You look at your watch as if you had an appointment and your footsteps race your heartbeats toward no goal. Taken by the pleasure of knowing the first Arab capital they will invade, the soldiers pay no attention to you. You will know from radio stations that the night of Sabra and Shatila was all lit up so that

the killers could peer into the eyes of their victims and not miss a moment of ecstasy on the slaughtering table. You will read what Jean Genet wrote:

What partying, what feasting went on there as death seemed to take part in the pranks of soldiers drunk on wine, on hatred, and probably drunk on the joy of entertaining the Israeli army, which was listening, looking, giving encouragement, egging them on. I did not see the Israeli army listening and watching. I saw what it did. Killers had carried out the operation, but numerous torture squads were probably the ones who split skulls, slashed thighs, cut off arms, hands and fingers, and dragged the dying and disabled by ropes, men and women who were still alive. A barbaric party had taken place there: rage, drunkenness, dancing, singing, curses, laments, moans, in honor of the voyeurs who were laughing as they sat on the top floor of the Akka hospital.

You cannot cross the threshold of pain nor reach the source of the nightmare to bear witness to your body being chopped up nor peer into the eyes of your killer, whom you know very well. You cannot speak to anyone, because the world is empty of the living and filled with the dead who bid farewell yesterday to their brothers and protectors who sailed on Greek-built ships of Trojan symbolism. The victims did not finish any of their tasks: they did not finish their dinner, prayers, or nightmares.

You avoided rhetoric because, when out of place, it becomes an accomplice to torture. In the diplomatic car that smuggled you from Beirut to Damascus, the Libyan ambassador said to you: If you had experienced some of what I have, you would have renounced the Arabic tongue. You said “thank you” and choked on the vowels. You did not cry this time, because fire and tears never come together in one eye or one phrase. When you looked into the bathroom mirror in a restaurant on the Tripoli shore, you saw a face you did not recognize: a big nose saddled with prescription glasses. It did not resemble you, yet it was your face!

If you are me, and I am you,

my friend, then we have a postponed rendezvous

in myth.

Which road shall we take?

You said: The road is ours when we speak of tomorrow. I said: The journey has begun. You said: How many times will you tell me the journey has begun?

I said: No tomorrow is final!

You said: But it hasn’t arrived.

I said: It passed us by, and we passed it by one day, but we didn’t notice.

You said: How many times will you tell me the journey has begun?

I said: The poem is incomplete.

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X

. . . .

This is your autumn. Tend to it as befits a poet who is skilled at throwing himself into metaphor: How I love autumn! Rein in place with the halter of expression before time kicks you into a vast abyss. Rein it in! Rein it in with all your knowledge of loss, and all the faith of a longing that turns back to look at paths now stripped of certainty.

This is your autumn, as is the beauty trees dispense of, leaf by leaf. No other beauty is yours as you stray into empty halls. You stamp on the floor for no other reason than to hear the sound of your footsteps. As if all time were a Sunday. No one wakes up now to make sure of anything. Silver holes appear in the light on sidewalks, like letters of a language yet to be written. A joy salutes you and keeps you company in the calm flowers of the squares: Slow down! Contemplate what makes you forget ready-made comparisons! Loosen the reins on place a bit, for this autumn memory too will need to arrange its chaos, drawer by drawer.

This is your autumn, opening, spreading the strong scent of exile and empty letters. So fill them with the yellow, coffee-brown, gold, and copper – nonsynonymous colors – of leaves that take their time in bidding farewell to the tree because the wind is absent today. You are so lonesome you do not think of loneliness. Because you have not bid farewell to anyone since

yesterday, you do not care if your shadow “walks before you or behind you.” The air is light and the earth seems solid.

And this is not one of the attributes of exile, as they said.

This is your autumn, emerging from a hot summer, from a season of global fatigue, from a seemingly endless war. An autumn that ripens the forgotten grapes on high mountains. An autumn that prepares for grand gatherings where the assembly of old gods reviews drafts of fates still being written, hammering out a truce between summer and winter. But autumn in the east is short. It passes like a quick wave from one traveler on horseback to another, as they pass each other, going in opposite directions. No one can rely on such an autumn, on dust storms, or on a temporary marriage.

As for autumn here – the autumn of a Paris returning from its long vacation – nature, tempted by rain, devotes itself to writing its lush poems with all of its skill and with the help of aging wine. A long, long autumn, like a Catholic marriage contract that does not betray its joy or misery to someone like you, a bystander. A patient autumn. An erotic embrace of light and shadow, male and female, of a sky that descends respectfully over trees disrobing with dignity, before the confusion of temptations between raining drops of light and luminous drops of water. An autumn showing off. An autumn becoming one with the beginnings of three seasons: summer’s nudity, winter’s intercourse, and spring’s youth.

And you, you tread lightly on the surface of this autumn day. You are invigorated, infatuated, and stunned: “How can anyone die on a day like this?” You do not know whether you live in autumn or whether it lives in you, even if you remember that you are in the autumn of life, where mind and heart master listening to time with a harmonious collusion of pleasure and wisdom. A noble rhythm raises the body to sense what is missing, so it is filled all the more with the beauty of cloudlessness and cloudiness. It prepares itself, like a weather station, to observe the appropriate weather conditions for a passing conversation: “It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it? So why don’t we meet for coffee?” The aroma of coffee has doors that lead to

another journey: to friendship, love, or loss without pain. Coffee moves from the metaphorical to the tangible.

A secret rhythm leads this experience to an absolute sense of departure; to the encounter between an autumn strolling through squares with the crowd, people and doves, and your own private autumn, your inner autumn. You wonder, as someone else has: Are we what we do with time, or are we what time does with us? Finding a response does not interest you as much as slowing down time. You do not want this autumn to end, just as you do not want the poem to grow to fullness and end. You do not want to reach winter. Let autumn be your private eternity.

But that is not, as they say, one of the attributes of exile!

Exile is not journeying, it is not leaving and returning. Nor is it to dwell in longing. It may be a visit, or a waiting for the effects of time, or a departure of the self for another – to know and be in harmony with, or for the self to return to its shell. Each exile has its character and every exile his characteristics. In exile you train yourself to contemplate and admire what is not yours. Exile edifies the body. The beauty of form enchants you, even when meaning is incomplete, for perfection is the awareness that something is missing. Statues that glorify the past, statues ready to leap from emotions of identity to the identity of emotions, and statues that liberate tomorrow from aesthetics and nature from the strict order of imagination. Beauty is grandeur. But because you grew up in the countryside, you side with the trees reflected on the river, and with doves flying between land and sky. You pause for a long time before an iris that sprang up alone, nowhere near a pot. Not because, like you, it is a stranger among flowers, but because it relies on itself in growing on its own. Exile is the poet's journey through a poem, a journey within a journey, but figurative language keeps looking back.

And looking back, they say, is one of the attributes of exile.

Where do I return? You wondered as you were hanging some paintings on the walls of your new address. Where do I go? Forward was temporary, and backward, beset by temporariness, was scattered. The eternity emerging from the sunlit garden was laughing. You teased it a bit saying: You are an exile too! You wondered: How many nails have you hammered into the walls of other houses? How many paintings have you hung? How many beds have you abandoned for others to sleep in afterward? How many drafts and beginnings have you forgotten in other drawers? How many photographs of women were lost in the folds of books you never read? How often did you ask: How many times must I travel, migrate, or depart? And for your fate the distinction between traveling, migration, and departure never became clear, because words can encompass so much of the illusion of synonyms, and because metaphor is often subject to transformation: from "my homeland is not a suitcase" to "my homeland is a suitcase."

In exile you choose a space to tame habit, a private space for your journal. So you write: *Place is not the trap. We can say: Here we have a side street, a post office, a bread seller, a laundry, a tobacco shop, a tiny corner, and a smell that remembers . . .*

Cities are smells: Acre is the smell of iodine and spices. Haifa is the smell of pine and wrinkled sheets. Moscow is the smell of vodka on ice. Cairo is the smell of mango and ginger. Beirut is the smell of the sun, sea, smoke, and lemons. Paris is the smell of fresh bread, cheese, and derivations of enchantment. Damascus is the smell of jasmine and dried fruit. Tunis is the smell of night musk and salt. Rabat is the smell of henna, incense, and honey. A city that cannot be known by its smell is unreliable. Exiles have a shared smell: the smell of longing for something else; a smell that remembers another smell. A panting, nostalgic smell that guides you, like a worn tourist map, to the smell of the original place. A smell is a memory and a setting sun. Sunset, here, is beauty rebuking the stranger.

But to love the sunset is not, as they say, one of the attributes of exile.

Memory, your personal museum, takes you into the realms of what is lost. A sesame field, a plot of lettuce, mint, a round sun that falls into the sea. What is lost grows in you and in the sunset, which grants what is distant the attributes of paradise and purges it of any defect. Whatever is lost is worshipped. Yet it is not so!

Rein in place, then, with the halter of expression! Carry it, just as you carry your name, not your shadow, in your imagination, not in a suitcase! In this sunset words alone are qualified to restore what was broken in time and place and to name gods that paid no attention to you and waged their wars with primitive weapons. Words are the raw materials for building a house. Words are a homeland!

Place a moon on every willow, a girl in every window, and a gazelle at every spring! Let the poem build the southern side of nothingness. If exile pains you and does not kill you, it will take you back to the cradle of imagination. It will strengthen you and make you equal to those who stay up late to tame the obscure. Exile, a misunderstanding between existence and borders, is a fragile bridge between images. It is a test of the ability of the narcissus to be at once haughty and humble, a debate between two different entities, and the avoidance of similitude. For not everything that renounces you here will embrace you there. Not everything you resemble there will embrace you here. Leave to the imagination that which is the imagination's: the liberty of words to obey emotions.

But expressing emotions, they say, is not one of the attrributes of exile.

So refine distance with the competence of a skilled professional and not the vulnerability of a perplexed lover. The poetry of exile is not what exile says to you, but what you say to it, one rival to another. Exile, too, is hospitable to difference and harmony. So fashion yourself out of yourself. And do not forget to thank exile graciously: I will praise you, O exile, where praise becomes you. There, under the fig tree that will welcome me, at my mother's house, a passerby in a passing autumn!

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XI

. . . .

Your day is ordinary. Gray clouds disregard the thoughts you read and write to them as they release a distant, very distant, musical note in some time and place. You turn the light on in the morning and open the dictionary haphazardly to a word to conduct your cerebral calisthenics. You are happy to know that you do not know. You correct your linguistic errors as the water boils. You set the dictionary aside and walk over to the kitchen. You drink a glass of cold orange juice. The bitter sugary taste refreshes you and you feel a surge of vigor running through your muscles and spirits. You make your coffee according to your strict ritual and the teachings of the rooster of cardamom. You return to the dictionary and memorize lines of poetry that accompany the various meanings of the word. You head for the door, but it does not open. You forget that you had taken the key out of the lock and placed it on the table. You have been doing this for a long time, since your friend died inside a locked room. You keep the lock free to welcome another key kept by the cleaning lady who comes at noon. Because you might die, and if the door was impossible to open, you and death would remain alone inside. What a malicious thought: you want to marry a woman whose only task is to announce your death! What selfishness! What a love, marrying one harbinger of death to another! You drink another cup of coffee. Then you collect the mail thrown behind the door. You open the letters hurriedly: the phone bill, TV tax, rent, electricity bill, a promotion for seasonal sales of Persian carpets, advertisements for voyages to distant islands, invitations to auctions on Louis XIV furniture,

and a jewelry exhibition. You smile: Nothing interests me. Then you turn the radio dial to listen to the news. Snow and avalanches, snow and strikes, snow and elderly people dying. There is no snow east of the Mediterranean, so no news. You turn the radio off and go to the bathroom. You gaze at your face in the mirror: Nothing new except irony rising to the eyebrows. No enemy is stronger than time and no rival nobler than the mirror. In the past, time would pass slowly, like an ant. We used to egg it on: Hurry up! We have a date in an hour, but the clock's hands did not respond to the flow of our hot blood. Time was lazy, as lethargic as a student, and as tedious as a teacher. It incited us to grumble about sluggishness, and never allowed us a glance at the past, because youth has no past. We devoured difficult books and let our knowledge simmer in time's pot like a wild mountain goat whose flesh calls for spices the doctor has forbidden, and because we failed to make it to the banquet at a reasonable hour, we fell into an unequal race with time, who pilots his spaceship at breakneck speed. We started asking it to slow down: O time, wait for us! Our appointment isn't for a month, so no need to hurry! There is so little time for us to choose the proper words for a ripe woman, to reserve two seats at the opera, and to make sure that no one will be mistakenly killed because pedestrians resemble one another at night. There is so little time for us to conduct a necessary review of all the synonyms for "emotion" in a thesaurus. We also say to time: Do not devour us before we cross the river and look from the other bank to the wooden seats we left behind on the other side, clean enough to receive other lovers who will observe us as we observe them, saying: They were like us. Will we be like them? You study your face in the mirror. You lather it and start to shave. You start on the left side, from the bottom of the sideburn, down to the chin, then back up. You open the hot water tap to clean your blade and start the same process on the other side. It is difficult to shave the corners of the mouth and the spot between the lower lip and chin. As usual a few drops of blood fall, so you press on the tiny cut with your thumb, then you look into the mirror with the satisfaction of one who pretends to forget how wily time can be. You undress and plunge into the hot tub. You play with soap bubbles and the colorful foam that looks like a melted rainbow. You rub each part of your body with extreme care as if you were a mother bathing her baby. You like to sing and the echo corrects the jarring tune. You are ecstatic and amazed by the link between water and song. The sound

of water is a rhythm. Perhaps music is the arrangement of drops of water in a soul that manifests itself through the player's hand on instruments made of liquid emotion. You go into the bedroom and open your closet. You put on white underwear, then a blue shirt, a dark blue pair of pants and socks (you cannot distinguish dark blue from black), and put on elegant black shoes (elegance starts with shoes), and leave for your morning appointment. To the obscure: the pastime that turned into a profession and the profession that never stopped being a pastime. Your cup of coffee is on the left side of the desk and on the right side a box of pens, next to a pot of black ink. In the middle, there is white paper full of white writing. It calls to you and you call to it. It holds and hides the memories of predecessors. Alone, without assistance or assurance, you try to find your own line in this white thicket that stretches between writing and speech. You no longer ask: What will I write, but rather how will I write? You call upon a dream, but it flees from the image; you seek a meaning, but the rhythm resists. You think you have crossed the threshold that separates the horizon from the abyss and are ably trained to open up metaphor to an absence that is present and a presence that is absent in a seemingly responsive spontaneity. You know that, in poetry, meaning is formed by the movement of meaning through rhythm; prose strives for the pastoral of poetry and poetry strives for the aristocracy of prose. "Take me to those flows of the river I know not, take me!" A musical note like this one makes its way into speech. An embryo forms, which forms the features of a voice and the promise of a poem. But it needs a thought to lead it and must be led through an atmosphere of open possibilities. It needs a terrain to move across and requires existential angst and history, or myth. The first line is the one those perplexed before its source call inspiration or illumination. What remains is up to you, and you alone. You have to find the rest and find the constituent elements adequate for pouring poetry, the poetry of life, into the map of the poem. Once the first line is revealed to you, you become the skilled craftsman, the poet, if you are fortunate and find the error. Is poetry not an attempt to correct an error? You leave your desk, reassured that your work will be cut out for you tomorrow morning as long as the first line awaits. You have lunch with a glass of wine listening to guitars that went mad on the road to Andalusia. You like to think that gray clouds are the memory of music in disguise. You lie down for a siesta of no more than half an hour. Half an hour to break the

day's routine and calm the heart's cadence. You wake up refreshed and bite into an apple or a pear in a hurry and go to your afternoon appointment. You always arrive ten minutes early. You choose a seat next to the glass wall in a nearly empty café. You leaf through the newspapers you had not read that morning. You look at the square. Full of pedestrians and daring doves. You contemplate the way women walk: some sway, some saunter slowly, some swing, some go to extremes to awaken the lightning between the legs. Then you busy yourself looking at the towering walnut trees soaking up drops of light. You feel a tap on your shoulder. You hug your friend, the sculptor, who warns you: This is the last time I will nominate you for immortality. You laugh, both at his humility and at immortality itself, and say: Didn't I tell you that immortality is the fodder of a thinking donkey, and a bribe offered by the cunning to a more cunning history? The waiter intervenes as he puts down a cup of coffee: immortality is a winning lottery ticket whose owner died minutes before the result was announced. The sculptor asks you: Why are you against my making a small statue of you to put next to your photo album? You answer: I don't have a photo album or an archive. Surprised, he asks: If you die, where will they find you? You say: In my grave. He insists: Why are you against the statue? You say: Because I want to keep moving, to reach out and shoo flies away from my face, to stick my tongue out, to put my feet down in the street. He says: Trust me, I will make movement visible. You say: And I don't want anyone to break me. I am the one who does that. A statue is incapable of self-criticism. He says: Then you are a donkey. You say: Just like this immortality of yours. You part amicably. You return to your apartment on foot, but not on all fours, because you are not a donkey. You look for a soccer match or a black-and-white film on TV, but find none. You wait for a call from a woman who was angry with you, because you argued over the definition of love. You read until midnight, then you put your head down on the pillow and go over your day: Have I offended anyone? And you fall asleep with two lines in your head:

Take me to those flows of the river I know not, take me!

Take me to you . . .

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XII

. . . .

You love sleep, a swooning wakefulness, like your own situation. Sleep is an overlord and sovereign. When asleep, you are your own overlord and sovereign. Alive, but without life's burdens. Alive in a metaphorical death chosen with the care of an angel to train the body for the visit of the invisible in a mutually befitting form. A sleeper does not age while asleep, nor does he fear or hear news that squeezes colocynth into the heart. But you ask yourself before going to sleep: What did I do today? You swing back and forth between the pain of criticism and the criticism of pain, and you gradually soothe yourself and fall asleep in your own lap, which gathers you from the ends of the earth and holds you tight as if you were your own mother. Sleep is the sheer delight of forgetfulness. If you dream, it's because memory remembers what you have forgotten of the obscure. You sleep and know that you are sleeping so it gladdens you and you sing the praises of laziness, the friend of sleep and of talent. You do not care if sleep prolongs your life, but you do care that life prolongs your sleep. Sleep is the senses hosting whiteness and blueness roaming the land of infinity without guides, priests, or mystics. Sleepers are equal, despite the differences in their hearts, or the lines on their hands. But wakefulness discriminates between sleepers, and drags them into wars before and after sleep. If only the world slept more, differences would diminish.

As you sleep you know that you are sleeping, and you delve deeper and become intoxicated by a warm cloud that embraces you as you embrace it. Two birds with no rendezvous or destination except this spontaneous embrace. Your left wing is yours alone and your right one too. Your snoring rouses you to remind you of your longing for more lightness: you are asleep. You might forget where you are, where you came from, and when you arrived. So you turn on the light and realize you are in the land of sleep. You thank the blessed lightness of feathers. You doze off unaware of a ray of light spying on you, or of the noise from the street. Because when sleep is sound, it neither listens nor sees.

But you see sleep, smell it, taste its happiness and touch it, bit by bit. You sleep and know that you are asleep and that you are on a deep journey without roads, maps, or addresses. On a picnic beyond any destination. You depart the world, the world of objects and words, and what separates them during the day brings them together at night, as if night were a bed. You are amazed by those who turn day into night and night into day. Sleep is the body being filled with stillness and serenity and the mind freed from fear and boredom. There is no boredom or danger in sleep. It is the need for a stupor in which things resemble their absent selves. Sleep alerts the imagination to the negative effects of time, if we do not stop the clock. It interrupts time's work. Eight hours, eight hours of sleep, no less. When it is reduced to less than that, for whatever reason, a phone ring or a doorbell, your wakefulness becomes dizzy and tainted with gloom. As if the insomnia that did not strike at night seizes the entire day by its collar.

How you used to hate insomnia, because it is impervious to dialogue, stubborn, and proud of its cunning ability to maneuver. Whenever you are courteous toward it, it grows more garrulous and aggressive toward a weak body already too powerless to indulge in the honor of resistance or the comfort of surrender. It pits the body against the senses to humiliate it. Insomnia is an unwelcome guest that arrives unannounced. It deprives you of both sleep and wakefulness. Insomnia is the buzzing of a mosquito and a secret struggle over a blanket, a pillow, and two knees. As you are yanked from your drifting body against your will and are returned to your first

body, numb and sleepy, you cannot find a description for the torture of numbness if it stays awake and endures. When insomnia intervenes, sleep cannot be negotiated with. Like revelation, or any limb or organ that refuses to respond, it cannot be negotiated with.

Trying to rescue your body, in limbo between sleep and wakefulness, you turn on the light with difficulty. With difficulty you open a book, start reading, and immediately forget what you've just read. You try to dream awake, to dream that you are sleeping, so you may sleep and know that you are asleep. You do not dream much. How long has it been? Since you put a pen and notebook at the edge of sleep to jot down the edges of words with delicate music and meter falling upon you like dew. It is neither poetry nor prose, neither earthly nor celestial. But it flies with you and you fly with it. You become pure, light, and transparent, consumed by a meaning you do not comprehend. You wake up in the morning, elated, as if you were completing the calling revealed to you, but all that you remember of it is the shiver giving you the power to sing. You realize that your day is an extension of your dream. Know then, you say to yourself, how to dream.

Ever since you set pen and paper nearby as a trap to catch the dream, the dream became fearful of being penned. Perhaps because it does not want to be penned or summoned on command, you must not wait for it the way you wait for inspiration. It will come like a sovereign, without permission, as does love. It will come when you are not waiting for it, transparent, so you know that you are asleep, not dead. It might take you by the hand to inspect the ruins of your forgotten self in a distant land. You say: I am he and he is the shadow, and you run through your memory. When the dream sees that you are about to notice the map of memory, it lends you one of its wings and takes off with you to orange groves hanging above the clouds, to unfamiliar birds that speak to you in their own language, which you understand without difficulty. A higher self is borne of you. You embrace the universe and it embraces you, your interior becomes your exterior and your exterior your interior. And you say: I am I!

You wake up in the morning drenched in dew trickling from a night embracing the day. You walk toward the tomorrow opened for you by the dream with obscure words that take you beyond this abyss. Go with them, with words, and play a game of innocence and intention. Write down with them all the names you missed and all the yearning for flight that makes the earth more round: an apple that falls upward and turns, with time, around its own core. For not all what was will be, and not all that will be was. You will not be censured if a sudden slip occurs in the dream's descent upon you. Like you and me, the dream can be struck with fever and become delirious, uttering words that rub against words, without producing a phrase. Non-meaning persists as the temperature rises.

The nightmare takes you to one high point overlooking another. In between lies an abyss whose depths the eyes cannot see. You try to leap from one pinnacle to the other but fall into the abyss and jolt awake to your sweat-drenched screams. The nightmare takes you to an official celebration. When you step onto the platform, you find yourself naked and barefoot, unable to step down. The nightmare submits you to an exam in Chinese grammar, but it never takes you, not even once, to a certain death or a long marriage.

Yet you love sleep and salute Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep, and forget that he is death's brother. You love sleep; a swooning wakefulness, like your own situation. But this time your sleep has gone too far; this time, you are not aware that you are asleep!

You have slept too long; rise with your dream and tell us what you saw.

Did you see angels playing Mozart on their neys, yet never intoxicated?

Did they pamper you and feed you sweet grapes?

Did you go for an outing in their orchards?

When they took you down to the river, a child, did you resemble them?

Who among you was transformed there, and who said: O my childhood friend?

Do the figs resemble the ones on your fence?

Does the dream, your dream, resemble the whites, greens, or blues that you know?

You have slept too long; rise with your dream and tell us what you saw.

“Is death a long sleep, or sleep a short death?” You have slept too long, now rise!

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XIII

. . . .

A memory of another sleep rests within this sleep of yours that I now carry for you. A dagger pierced your heart, and you cried: In which heart was I struck? You did not hear anyone reminding you that you had but a single heart, because you had fainted in Vienna's cold night. And you lived, because a divine hand came to your aid. So why don't you rise now and ask me: In which heart was I struck? I will lie to you: the heart carved into the trunk of a tree!

White sleep. Dazzling sleep carried you like a feather on white clouds . . . You emerged from your body and swam; one atom of the universe's atoms. You leave your self and do not enter a form. You swim as if you were flying and fly as if you were swimming. Light and transparent as if you were your soul, without past and present, emptied of time and feeling. You are neither something nor nothing. But you see as you have never seen before. You see white light, white clouds, white air. You do not ask where you are, for there is no one around you. You do not wish to know where you are flying, you are not afraid of flying. As if you were one of the attributes of the sheer bliss scattered on the cotton of eternal rest. You do not fear falling from heights or ascending, for there is no descent or ascent in this circular non-place. You do not resemble the star that left its course and continued to orbit the galaxy. You do not remember when you left your body, because you do not remember that you were ever in one. You passed through a narrow

tunnel and were distilled like a drop of water on the horizon. This is how you were created before you were born in this soothing white space. You returned to your beginning. You sleep yet do not know that you are asleep. You do not dream, as if dreaming were the invention of those deprived of living in a sky like this. As if you were your soul, freed from the prison of time and form, roaming, roving, and rising to a non-resting place.

Then you cried out, suddenly you cried out when you returned to a body tied to wires and machines in a gray room. Where am I? you asked, but they forbade you to speak. Later you knew that this cry of pain signaled your return to life, which begins and ends with a cry. You asked: Where was I then? You were told that death had kidnapped you for a minute and a half and that an electric shock had brought you back to life. You thought: Was death that beautiful and comforting? No, this is not death. It is another form of life. It is healthy sleep, a sleep of utter pleasure. You realized what you had never realized before. Death does not pain the dead, it pains the living. In the intensive care unit the doctors gave us permission to celebrate your birthday.

Cry, my friend, so that I know you are alive! Ask me to lie to you: I am alive, like you. A survivor of an accident of life, of which death reminds us. So we live it with joy, as if we were on our way to a picnic. Death forgets us, so we live through it as if it were an endless invasion. I am like you on this threshold; I cry out to know that I am alive. But you don't cry out, as I do, so I may know you are alive. My address has gone on for too long, and you have not risen. I must stop now to take up the tasks death dictates and extend condolences to those who have died in these hours. And to take up the tasks life dictates and offer congratulations to those who were born in these hours. The cry is the same cry at the two gates: entrance and exit. As for nothingness, it limits itself to eloquent threats from afar.

From afar, the poems come. I resemble you, yet I do not become you. I become you, yet I do not resemble you.

A memory of another sleep rests within this sleep, which I now carry on your behalf. The doctor told us: As of today, start preparing the funeral. We did not believe him and did not ask where, because you did not leave a will. Paris was taken by spring. Mist mixed with our tears. Did we not celebrate your birthday here just a week ago when you said, jokingly: Perhaps it is my last birthday? Then you went into the operating room with an excitement we could not understand.

You are delirious. You lash at the air and the wires with your hands and legs, you are delirious. They restrain you, give you anesthetics, putting the raging bull in you to sleep, but you remain delirious.

A pit like the bottom of an abandoned well. You scream but do not hear your screaming. You suffocate from smoke emitted by a defect in the breathing machine, you see it and smell it and suffocate. Two male orderlies tie you to a rock and start to pummel you. A bus without a driver takes you to a prison cell. You scream but do not hear your own screaming. You see yourself walking naked down the street. You try to cover your private parts with your hand, but your hand falls off. A boy picks it up and throws it back at you, laughing: My father is mad. You scream but your screaming doesn't come out. It drops into your lungs like a rock. You yank at one of the machines and an alarm sounds. The prison guard arrives with a huge club. You try to say something to him, but nothing comes out. You gesture that you want a pen and paper. You write: I have lost my language!

When you wake from your hallucination and calm down, you realize that you are at the hospital and ask: When will they operate? They tell you that it was done a week ago. You continue reading *Gate of the Sun.* The author visits you and you discuss some details with him with a lucid mind. At the end of the visit you whisper to him: Soon, when the guards are distracted, take me with you! Get me out of this prison! You do not understand why his eyes well up. As soon as he bids you farewell, you fall again to the bottom of the abandoned well and scream: Get me out of here! The guards beat you up until you lose consciousness.

Whenever a visitor calls, you appear to be calm at first. But by the end of the visit, you narrate the story of your torture and ask him to collude in smuggling you out. You did not know you were locked in a struggle with death. You thought you were in a struggle for freedom. Layla, your guardian angel, and your friends Nabil, Subhi, Elias, and Faruq, thought that you had gone mad. She called the doctor late at night to ask him whether you had really gone mad. He assured her that it was merely a hallucination caused by the large doses of anesthetics. "His unconscious is resisting death. But be prepared for the worst!" he said. Later you thought to yourself: What would be worse, for death to triumph and for you to fly off on the journey of whiteness, or for you to triumph over death with the help of madness and roam the streets of scandal?

You saw a mouse dart by you a year ago and hide in the bedroom. You looked for it in every corner, coat, shoe, and drawer, but could not find it. You slept in another room. When you opened the suitcase in another city, you saw it jump out and hide in a frenzy. You asked the hotel to change your room. When you returned from your trip and opened your suitcase, there it was, mocking you, and then it went back into hiding. Was the mouse following you, or were you following the mouse? Was it a mouse or an obsession? Did you fear it or did it fear you? A pit like the bottom of an abandoned well and a mouse jumping from untethered delirium to untethered delirium. You are tied to a rock like a muzzled scream: I wish I were there, in that first death, a cloud among clouds. No one heard you except me.

You saw poets setting traps to catch mountain quail.

You saw martyrs standing, each on his own star, happy for the hope they offered the living dead.

And you saw. You saw a country the martyrs donned and elevated one revelation after another. Then bring it back, green and blue. Harsh in raising their progeny: Die so that I may live! They do not apologize and do not forget their legacies to their progeny: You are our tomorrow, live so that

we may live through you! Love pomegranate and lemon blossoms. Pour our wine on Valentine's Day! for we could not find the time to drink it with you. Forgive us, we did not find the time. Do not forget to find time to celebrate love, and seek revenge, through love, for us and for you!

You listen to them as a song of praise listens to its rhythm. The jar falls from death's hand and breaks apart. You pick up the shards, letter by letter, assemble the name, and speak. When you see them carrying rainbows with the lightness of those ascending above, you realize that heroism is far simpler than its representation. And that there are tasks behind them, and before you, that yearn to derive meaning from absurdity. When you hear them reciting what you don't understand, you realize that death is an obscure metaphor that lies behind the transparent density of this long passage. You rise from your bed, confident of your soul's well-being, and crawl. Relying on yourself, you crawl on your hands and knees to the bathroom. When you hear the water gurgling, you know that you are alive. You do it again so you can hear the sound of water. Water, water, water.

Do you not hear the sound of water now? It is raining!

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XIV

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Longing is the absent chatting with the absent. The distant turning toward the distant. Longing is the spring's thirst for the jar-carrying women, and vice versa. Longing allows distance to recede, as if looking forward, although it may be called hope, were an adventure and a poetic notion. The present tense is hesitant and perplexed, the past tense hangs from a cypress tree standing on its rooted leg behind a hill, enveloped in its dark green, listening intently to one sound only: the sound of the wind. Longing is the sound of the wind.

The more you delve into your loneliness, like that tree, the more longing takes you with motherly tenderness to its country, which is made of transparent, fragile fibers. Longing has a country, a family, and an exquisite taste in arranging wildflowers. It has a time chosen with divine care, a quiet mythical time in which figs ripen slowly and the gazelle sleeps next to the wolf in the imagination of the boy who never witnessed a massacre. Longing takes you around its country like a tour guide in heaven. It takes you to a mountain where you used to take refuge to wallow in wild plants until your pores soak up the smell of sage. Longing is smell.

Longing has a favorite season: winter. It is borne of the first drops of water on dry grass and heaves deep sighs of feminine hues, craving moisture. Rain is the promise of a universal wedding. Rain is a promise that what is

sealed will open into an essence and that the infinite will reincarnate itself in nature.

Many an oak tree cranes toward two: you and she, running in the rain, without an umbrella or a hat, happy with an honorable scandal, happy to be half-clad. You run, not knowing where, liberated from path and destination. You pant together from pleasurable fatigue. You sneak into the narrow hollow of an oak only big enough for one. You draw close to one another until you are one. You cling to each other and water heats up inside you and over you. You pant out of warmth. Desire does not need the pretext of the rain, which drew you into the oak's bedchamber and departed. Longing is the fusion of fire and water.

Fever has another attribute: longing. Every winter an absent joy pains you. You walk in the rain, a single duo: you and the person you were in another winter. You surreptitiously mutter to yourself words you don't understand, because of memory's inability to retrieve a previous emotion, and because of longing's ability to add what did not exist to what did. Like the tree that becomes a forest and the stone that becomes a quarry. Like being happy in a prison cell you see as larger than a public garden, or like the past that stands waiting for you tomorrow, like a loyal dog. Longing lies and never tires of lying, because it lies honestly. The lying of longing is a profession. Longing is a frustrated poet rewriting the same poem hundreds of times. And an old man who continues to crawl, unaware of the movement of time, having avoided looking in the mirror. Longing is the innocent forgery of documents to protect the exile's frame of reference from rust. It is the limestone needed to scrub abandoned houses.

But no one longs for pain, fear, or a funeral. Longing is the specialty of memory in beautifying what was hidden in the scene, fixing a window that had fallen off without ever having hit the street. Longing is exile punishing the exiled and the exile's shame of admiring the music and gardens of exile. To long means not to find joy in anything here, except shyly. If I were there, you say, if I were there, my laughter would be heartier and my speech clearer. Longing is the yearning of words for their initial realm, even if

yours were obscure and foreign to those around you. But I, you tell yourself, prefer being a stranger in exile to being a stranger at home, because in exile it is required.

Therefore, when in crowds, you long for yourself and for the solitude to write. Writing is nearness and alienation, exchanging past and present. The thirst of words for water glitters in the mirage of myth, the revolt of resemblance against the resembled, reality camouflaged by image. With the silky hands of longing you tame distance as you make borrowed stars the roof of your sky and go with another, real, woman to a warm room, cured of the causes of fever and of the waves of groaning that never cease. The sound of rain on glass stirs desire. This is more than enough for light to rise from the body's night: *Your bed is your secret. Your past will come tomorrow on a star that does not harm the dew.* You let your head fall on her lap to listen to what a body free of longing says. For Eve was just created and you have just been born without a memory. You are my tomorrow and my present. I have no yesterday, you tell her. She tells you: You are my tomorrow and my present. I have no yesterday. You sleep, two as one, and do not dream of more than this. Your tempting unknown was so bent on kindling enchantment that neither of you asked the other the meaning of your names. She enchants you and you enchant her. After you possess her and she possesses you, you are filled with her and she is filled with you, what calls on her from distant provinces calls on you, she longs for her past behind the door and for a song other than your song.

Longing for the beginning, for the way the key was inserted into the door. Hiding the gaze from its object. Choosing a seat and the music for the night with practiced spontaneity is the emotional exercise of taking the universe's pulse. That longing is a remembrance of the most beautiful chapter in the tale: the first chapter, improvised with efficient intuition.

Thus, longing is born from every beautiful incident and not from a wound. Longing is not a memory, but rather what is selected from memory's museum. Longing is selective, like an adept gardener. It is the replaying of a memory after its blemishes have been removed. Longing has side effects:

an addiction to looking back, an embarrassment of being informal with what is possible, an overwhelming urge to turn the present into a past, even in love: Come with me tonight so that we might make tonight a shared past, says the one afflicted with longing. I will come with you to make a shared tomorrow, says the one afflicted with love. She does not love the past and wants to forget the war that has ended. He fears tomorrow, because the war has not ended and he does not want to grow older.

Longing is a scar inside the heart and a country's fingerprint on the body. But no one longs for his wound, no one longs for pain or nightmare, but for what was before. For a time when there was no pain except of primary pleasures that melt time, like a sugar cube in a cup of tea, and for a time of heavenly images. Longing is the call of ney to ney to restore the direction broken by the horses' hooves in a military campaign. It is an intermittent ailment, neither contagious nor lethal, even when it takes the form of an epidemic. It is an invitation to stay up late with the lonesome and an excuse not to be on equal footing with train passengers who know their own addresses well. It is the transparent fabric of that beautiful nothingness, gathered to roast the coffee of wakefulness for the dreams of strangers.

It rarely comes in the morning. And it rarely interferes in a passing conversation with a taxi driver, intrudes in a conference hall, or on the first date between a man and a woman. It is the evening guest, arriving when you look for your own traces in what is around you and cannot find them. When a sparrow perches on the balcony and seems to be a message from a country you did not love when you were in it as you love it now that it is in you. It was granted, a tree, a rock. It became the address of a soul and an idea, an ember in language. It was air, earth, and water, and it became a poem.

Longing is the groaning of right when incapable of providing proof of the might of right before the might of oppression. The groaning of homes buried beneath settlements that the absent bequeathed to the absent, and the present to the absent, with the first drop of milk in exile and in refugee camps. Longing is the sound of silk rising, in mutual groaning, from the

mulberry to the one longing for it. It is the convergence of conscious and unconscious instinct. It is lost time protesting the sadism of the present.

Longing is an ache that does not long to ache. It is the aching stirred by pure air coming from a distant mountaintop, the ache of searching for a past happiness. But it is a healthy kind of ache, because it reminds us that we are afflicted with hope . . . and are sentimental!

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XV

. . . .

Love, like meaning, is out on the open road, but like poetry, it is difficult. It requires talent, endurance, and skillful formulation, because of its many stations. It is not enough to love, for that is one of nature's magical acts, like rainfall and thunder. It takes you out of yourself into the other's orbit and then you have to fend for yourself. It is not enough to love, you have to know how to love. Do you know how? You cannot answer, because you cannot relive the ecstasies that shook you and scattered you all over the lilac's escapade, electrified you and tortured you with the scorching taste of honey. You cannot recall the liveliest and sweetest modes of death; when your "I" left you for your woman, and you encountered your self, fresh as a ripe fruit, in her.

When recalled by words, those moments are impervious to the attempt to raise the body to the station of the soul. Who among us has not said to his woman: "I only exist in you," and was truthful. We were truthful, as well, when we found our existence in a similar utterance in a different place. So do you know how to love? You cannot answer, perhaps because you did not notice the subtle atmospheric shifts when traveling from pole to pole: love and passion, rapture and infatuation, ardor and affection, fondness and devotion, blazing love and bewildering love, craving and caprice, dalliance and desire, longing and lust, admiration and attraction, and other desires in search of senses. In every station the body has a certain state, and for every

state there is a station between death and life. So you never know where or how you are.

But as you look over your life now, like a mariner considering his own disappointment with the unfathomable secrets of the sea, you ask: Where is my port? You are uncertain how your heart returned safe and solid, like a quince still too hard to bite. Why did you cry, then, when the virgin by the tree was no longer a virgin because one of those who tame the wind had beaten you to her? And why did you cry again, when the second one did not open the door as you stood in the bitter cold shivering from humiliation, not from the cold that lit up your furnace? And why did you cry a third time when the third one departed without noticing that you were hugging a pillow, not a body of silk and ostrich feathers?

There is no love, you say, because no love is like any other. The magnetic pull that uproots a being from its being cannot be defined. So forceful is it that he never asks about his spirit when it is exiled, nor about his freedom when it has become voluntary slavery: I am yours! With one lock of hair astray in the wind, mountains are moved. Two parted lips ripen cherry orchards before their time. With a word without meaning, interpretation makes you a king on a throne of dust.

As if electrocuted, you walk aimlessly, drifting with falling leaves. The storm and your emotions make you dizzy and you make them dizzy. You do not know if you are happy or sad, because the confusion you feel is the lightness of the earth and the victory of the heart over knowledge. You will later learn that love, your love, is only the beginning of love. In the beginning of love you are prepared, like a musical instrument, to compose according to the dictates of the air. Every breeze is a musical note and every silence a prayer of gratitude.

You are prepared also for a nocturnal reconnaissance of every sound coming to you from the star’s abode. So prolong this beginning, the beginning of love, so that imagination will submit to you as a horse to its

rider. So that language will conquer you and you it, like a man and a woman racing to greet the unknown with the generosity of mutual obedience.

In the beginning of love, beginnings swarm down on you, deep blue. At the height of love you live it, you forget it, it forgets you and makes you forget the beginnings. At the end of love you look long at the clock. In absence, beginnings find the residual aches of the room: not having a second glass of wine, a missing blue shawl. The poem is filled with missing elements, and when you complete it with an incompleteness that opens into another poem, you are cured of memories and regrets. The gold in you does not rust. As if writing were, like love, the offspring of a cloud. When you touch it, it melts. As if the utterance were only incited in an effort to make up for a loss. The image of love reveals itself there; in a profoundly present absence.

And when you step out of yourself, as if you were you, you look at yourself from a distance as if you were he: standing in the rain on a street crowded with pedestrians, a bouquet of red roses in your hand. You do not feel cold in your peculiar stance, you feel the chill of mockery. You wonder: Was it love or passion or lust? And you forget your emotion. You forget it and do not look for it. You are not hurt or regretful. You simply greet it from afar as it moves toward a distant memory that will not make you sleepless. A memory you control as you might control the VCR: you place the end at the beginning, or freeze the image according to the wishes of your mercurial heart.

You laugh, embarrassed by words that were so excessive in praising lust that they consumed it. A lust that starts with a pair of feet sculpted by a sliver of sun, moving up two skillfully cast legs from where lightning flashes, and on to knees that were certified miracles. Higher still: the belly ebbs. Farther up: sunset gradually absorbs you with noble, bashful voraciousness. You approach and retreat, rise and fall, sweat, sigh, and drown in an enchanting night of sultry darkness. Her hands, or maybe yours, gather and carry you like an eagle swooning in a sky dripping with stars. You peek at her half-open eyes peeking at your half-closed eyes. Each of you wants to make sure that you are budding inside one another.

But no one makes a peak his abode. You both slip together from the highest heaven into a dewy drowsiness. You both whisper in the shared silence and say nothing, but it is more lucid than anything. You dream together, and separately, that this embrace might last forever, until you realize that "forever" has a very short life span, and that eternity does not heed anyone. It often circulates and shifts from one minute to another and from one state to another.

You, who only know love when in love, do not ask what it is, nor do you look for it. But when a woman once asked you if you were in love with love itself, you were evasive and escaped by answering: I love *you*. She persisted: Do you not love love? You said: I love you, because of you. She left you, because you could not be trusted with her absence. Love is not an idea. It is an emotion that can cool down or heat up. It comes and goes. It is an embodied feeling and has five, or more, senses. Sometimes it appears as an angel with delicate wings that can uproot us from the earth. Sometimes it charges at us like a bull, hurls us to the ground, and walks away. At other times it is a storm we only recognize in its devastating aftermath. Sometimes it falls upon us like the night dew when a magical hand milks a wandering cloud.

But all of these forms coalesce – become visible, perceptible, and tangible – in a woman, not in the idea itself. We love the lure of form, and imagination devotes itself to discerning what is mysterious and wondrous within. As for souls, they acquaint themselves and become intimate with its glittering form through its essence. You might disagree about what one body says to the other, so you move on to the transparent and slip into bodies brimming with water, harmony, and music. Love shifts, transforms, and is impervious to identification. It is being seized in such a manner that infatuation becomes confused with illumination. It is what you do not know, and know that you do not know. It is the completion of meaning with non-meaning, because of its excessive tendency to take things for granted and squander its presence. It resists repetition and negates the need to mend air with color. Otherwise, it might become a marriage where correcting each other's assertions replaces the improvisation of poetry, from which love breathes. The prose

of domestic chores is not conducive to keeping two fresh pears on a marble plate, or for inciting the unknown to block the road in the face of the known. There must be a secret. There must be an ongoing secret for love to remain a surprise and a gift. So do not open the closet that contains the secrets of her nature.

If infatuation subsides, love drifts, little by little, toward the daylight of friendship. You say to her: How beautiful is our friendship, to age together and lean on each other and feel compassion for each other in an old people's home when we lose our memory. But I would rather lean on my cane, and not on you. I do not want to see Romeo and Juliet, or Qays and Layla grow old before me. Love has an expiration date, just like life, canned food, and medicine. But I would prefer love to collapse from a cardiac arrest at its peak of desire and infatuation, like a horse falling off a mountain into an abyss.

I asked you: Who is she? You said: She has so many selves that I myself do not know her. She and not she. She and her personae, when they come together in a love poem, that draws on many sources, search for the fulfillment of what cannot be fulfilled, are moved by a call that overwhelms us without our realizing that it has yet to arrive, and by a renewed thirst next to the spring. She and not she; she is present and absent, it is as if her presence holds my absence within her, and her absence carries the presence of details. But she moves with so many names it is impossible to know if she is she, or one of the women my imagination and mercurial desires have invented. But it seems that she is an invention, because I never confuse names. I never call another by her name, which I have forgotten because so rarely did I use it.

I asked you: Do you not know how to love, then? I was astonished when you said: What is love? As if I had not loved, except when I imagined that I was in love. Such as when I am taken by a hand waving out of a train window – perhaps not meant for me – but I take it as such and kiss it from afar. Or when I see a girl waiting for someone at the entrance of a cinema and I imagine that I am that someone and take a seat next to her and see

myself with her on the screen during a romantic scene. I do not care whether I am happy or sad by the end of the film. Because I look for her in what comes after the end. I do not find her next to me after the curtain falls.

I asked you: Were you acting, my friend?

You said: I used to invent love when necessary. When I walked alone on the riverbank. Or whenever the level of salt would rise in my body, I would invent the river.

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XVI

. . . .

A long time elapses between exiting and entering, which allows you to bid farewell to exile with appropriate melancholy. But you did not understand why tears lurked beneath the surface of words, and then rose and overflowed at the Tunis theater when you bid your farewell to Tunisia and to those returning to the back corner of the homeland. The ones leaving the realm of myth for the narrow confines of reality. A certain hope drips from a horizon heavy with the steam of summer over a pain whose side effects no one noticed. Perhaps the joy of a new adventure, the adventure of rediscovering the Promised Land, is what made the returnees forget to praise Carthage with words in keeping with its hospitality and its sea.

Returning, we are returning, without a lofty anthem or a bold banner. At times it seemed as if we were sneaking through a hole in the wall, and at others as if we were celebrating our entrance through a wide gate into an aptly named prison of our national chaos. The migrants are returning and the returnees are migrating. And in the midst of it, a certain joy is brought about by the necessary forgetfulness of the circumstances that govern words. When symbols, names, and words become separated from what they represent: like return, independence, state, peace, sovereignty, red carpet, ministry, presidency. Words that point to the thing from a distance, but neither express it nor resemble it. As if identity, craving completeness, were imbued with a wish it thought had already been fulfilled.

A silent contest with the self is postponed by the joy of coming full circle upon the waves of the sea, which this time is our sea. The returnee's imagination grasps only too well the singularity of beautiful images, which atone for the sin of obligatory and semi-obligatory departure. And that alone is recompense enough for our exodus. We will see our sun rise from the east, not from the direction of exile. Our fruits squeeze the sensual from the intellectual:

The apple is biting the form without being punished for acquiring knowledge.

The pear is a perfectly formed breast, no bigger or smaller than the palm of a hand.

The grape is sugar calling out: Press me in your mouth or keep me in jars.

The apricot is the return of longing to its pale origin.

The orange is a thought that glows in the dark and can be devoured anytime.

The fig is the parting of the lips by two fingers to receive the erotic sense all at once.

The prickly pear is the virgin's defense of her treasure.

The cherry trims the distance between the desire of eyes and the passion of lips.

The quince is a woman teasing a man, leaving a bitter aftertaste in the mouth of the disappointed.

The mango is saliva flowing for palpable ecstasy.

The strawberry is a small kernel of a color neither red nor not-red, bespeaking the scandal of similitude.

The mulberry, black or the color of sweetness, is the memory of a first kiss.

Pomegranates are rubies hiding in allusion.

Whenever the returnee approaches the stage of return, he becomes its frame, but this does not stop emotions from flowing. A coy heroism dismounts without a horse and becomes part of the ordinary receiving the ordinary. You will kiss the earth, embrace tree trunks, and utter sacrosanct words from the rhetoric of the victor or the prisoner. A rhetoric shaped by exile to better the living conditions of limbo, and to announce the good tidings protecting the collective heart from harm. Whenever the returnee approaches the land of great dreams, his eyes well up and his stride becomes halting, lest he stumble on his path of sand. He looks back and bids farewell to a heroism whose rituals he obeyed with a soldier's discipline. A heroism now eclipsed by his desire for a nap under a grapevine.

Has the journey ended or begun? Has he come closer to the place, or has the place departed from his imagination? The older returnee is prone to making comparisons, perplexed as to whether he should prefer the imagined over the real. As for the one born in exile and reared on the beautiful attributes of exile's antithesis, he might be let down by a paradise created especially for him, composed of words he soaked up and reduced to stereotypes that would guide him to difference. He inherited memory from a family that feared forgetfulness, upon which the others had wagered. He inherited memory from the steady refrain of anthems glorifying folklore and the rifle, which eventually became an identity when the "homeland" was born far away from its land. The homeland was born in exile. Paradise was born from the hell of absence.

And you, you were not with them. You spent as many years in exile as you did in the homeland. You did not understand why you cried in the theater in

Tunis and why the audience also cried, as if struck by the contagion of tears. Tears are contagious, like yawns. Was it because you were not with them, or was it because you were the one who formulated the declaration of the wished-for state while knowing that this state was still nothing more than a literary text? And you felt that the gate through which the returnees were stepping led neither to independence nor a state. It is true that the occupation has left the bedroom, but it is still sitting comfortably in the living room and in all the other rooms. It controls the water faucet, the electricity switch, and the blueness of the sea. Is this not somewhat positive? Is this not better than nothing? You split in two: One says yes, and one says no. But why all this false celebratory clamor that drugs the world with images?

You were glued to the TV and assumed a neutral stance in the presence of a dilemma that erected a wall between the mind and the heart. The mind says: It is a false and failed play. The heart asks: How can I survive the magic of its mise-en-scène? The grass is green, the weather is ideal for a picnic, and the master of the world is handsome. The two sworn enemies approach and shake hands: one reluctantly, the other with cheerful confidence. The carefully selected audience applauds a juncture in history on the lawn of the White House. But the language you hear brings your heart back to its senses: No, this is not my language. Where is the eloquence of the victim recalling his long suffering in the face of the misery of the moment when enemy looks enemy in the eye and shakes his hand insistently? Where are the voices of those murdered, old and recent, demanding an apology, not only from the murderer, but from history as well? Where will meaning go when opposites meet? Where is the scream from a surgical procedure where the past is severed from the present in the adventurous march toward an uncertain tomorrow? And where is my language?

Is this why your personal response was the poetic defense of narrative and memory? So you set to paper the echoes of an individual and collective biography and wondered: *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* For what can a poet do before history's bulldozer but guard the spring and trees, visible and invisible, by the old roads? And protect language from receding

from metaphorical precision and from being emptied of the voices of victims calling for their share of tomorrow's memory on that land over which a struggle is being waged. A struggle for what lies beyond the power of weapons: the power of words.

The poison-tipped questions were shot at you: What will you write without exile? What will you write without the occupation? Exile is existence. The existing occupation is what hinders the efficacy of the imagination. I will write better. But why are such questions never put to poets from other countries? Is it because slavery is the precondition for Palestinian creativity, or is it that freedom is not in sync with our rhythms? What does it mean for a Palestinian to be a poet and what does it mean for a poet to be Palestinian? In the first instance: it is to be the product of history, to exist in language. In the second: to be a victim of history and triumph through language. But both are one and the same and cannot be divided or entwined.

Gaza and Jericho first. And if you behave yourselves, they will not be the last. Finally you traveled to Gaza. You had never seen it. You wrote for and about it as it presented itself: a fort besieged by sea, palm trees, invaders, and sycamores. A fort that never falls. Gaza is pride taking pride in its name, unceasingly provoked by the world's silence before its long siege. On the long road from Cairo, on the sands of the Sinai, you were unable to turn your fluctuating feelings into clear words. Words were too disobedient to leave the heart and reach the tongue, like the Russian "L," which rises from the belly and stops at the roof of the mouth.

You asked the driver: Where is Ma'īn Basīsū? Why did he not come with me? He reminded you that he now slept in a sand ditch outside of Cairo. They couldn't find a place for him in Gaza. You muttered: We were looking for a home and now we are looking for a grave. Ah, had he waited just a bit! Had he not traveled to London and not put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door of his hotel room, he would have been my host in Gaza today. Gaza is his private property and his personal poetic kingdom. Without him Gaza will seem so impoverished!

Sunset in al-‘Arīsh was slow. The sun’s rays take their time embracing the palm fronds. You contemplate the color of fire slowly descending from them to adorn the sea’s undulations as they give in to an eternal dalliance. They greet us with a damp summer breeze as if fanned by the wing of a charitable angel. When will we reach Gaza? You asked your friend, who was busy with the embers of his hookah. He said: When night falls? You said: I want to see it with all my senses. He smiled: The homeland is more beautiful at night. Take in the sunset of the al-‘Arīsh now, because you will not see the sea there the way that you see it here. The sea there is colonized. He repeated: The homeland is more beautiful at night, so go slowly, go slowly! You put your note- and hope-book in your handbag and shut your emotions inside. What do you feel? Yasir asked you. You said: The long road has drained me of all feelings and expectations. I don’t feel a thing or expect anything now. He said: All the better!

We entered, or snuck into, Gaza in the dark. I let you walk ahead of me and carried your imagination for you, because you would be incapable of mending it if it were to crash on hard reality. I saw you averting your face from the eager cameras mounted to capture the ecstasy of the returnees and to record the words prepared for an invective against exile. You said: I came, and did not arrive. I came, and did not return. You did not lie to anyone, or to yourself. This was not a time for celebration. Gaza has yet to repair itself. The destruction left by the military occupation shook you to your core. If you do not dream of what lies ahead, the sea will run away from the fishermen in your language. That night, chopped up by checkpoints, settlements, and watchtowers, one needed a new geographical method to recognize the borders between one footstep and the next and between what is prohibited and permitted, not unlike to the challenge of distinguishing between what is vague and what is clear in the Oslo Accords.

At the end of the night you can only sleep with the help of a sleeping pill. When you wake up, you need some time to be convinced that you are in Gaza, which you then describe as “the city of misery and might.” Late in the sultry morning you go together with some returning friends to visit the camps. It is hard to walk in the alleys, and your own cleanliness and access

to water shames you. You do not believe, and never did, that these holding tanks of misery are a necessary step toward immortalizing or affirming the right of return. But you remember what you really should forget: the world's conscience. You vilify theories of progress and the teleology of history, which might take humanity back to the Stone Age. To keep some perspective, you deprive yourself of the serum of optimism and zeal and instead take a pill for high blood pressure. You say: If I think of anything else, I will have to throw my conscience to the cats.

You wonder: What kind of a linguistic or legal wunderkind could formulate a peace treaty and good neighborliness between a palace and a shack, between a guard and a prisoner?

You walk down the alleys ashamed of everything: your ironed shirts, the aesthetics of poetry, the abstractness of music, and a passport that allows you to travel the world. You are stabbed by a pain in your consciousness. And you return to a Gaza that looks down on its refugee camps and its refugees, and seems apprehensive of the returnees. You do not know which Gaza you are in, and you say:

I came, but did not arrive.

I came, but did not return!

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XVII

. . . .

On the coastal road, your heart leaps ahead of you like a hunting dog. You did not sleep even though you were dreaming of flying low like a partridge. You know that no peak remains high forever. Time has the effect of a chisel on stone. Places might move if infatuation were allowed to rage the way it wants to and reduce you to a feather, just as you are now on this coastal road that points north like an arrow. Is north still in its rightful place, with its dual identity of mountain and sea?

You have not slept well since you arrived in Ramallah from Amman two days ago. You stood at the Allenby Bridge like an esteemed prisoner among soldiers who were eyeing you with intense curiosity while waiting for further orders from another security apparatus to ascertain that you are indeed you, not an other who repossessed your body and assumed your identity so he might experience this humiliation and write poems about dodging a shadow.

They were not entirely wrong, because on this bridge no one is who he was just a moment before: eager for his rendezvous with the land of small and tall tales, folded up onto himself like a cabbage or an unpeeled onion. There the soldier, be it male or female, will peel him unceremoniously. Because they posses the right to do with him as they wish: Take off your shoes! Take off your watch! Undo your belt! Take off your glasses and walk through the

metal detector! The machine beeps, you do it again, and it beeps again. You are frisked and they find the source of the beeping. It is your superb ink pen. They take it apart and find only black ink: Next time, take the pen out of your pocket! So you say: Next time I will not carry this kind of pen.

There, on the bridge, which no longer has a river beneath it because the sources of its waters had been plundered, the dream becomes frugal, the country's image pales, and you are not you. You approach Jericho, real, not mythical, Jericho. Palm trees line both sides of the road and your eyes look for the famous Flower of Jericho, but you cannot find it. Nor do you find traces of the myth that had grown tedious from having been so frequently narrated and doubted by historians. But Jericho is right here in Jericho. You ascend the Mount of Temptation to a tiny monastery carved in the rock face. Here, Satan came to Christ when he fasted for forty days and forty nights until hunger overcame him.

The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor and said to him, "All of this I will give you, if you will fall to your knees and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil let him be and suddenly angels came and ministered to him.

You sit in a nearby café and cannot drink the coffee because of the flies competing with you for it. Unceasing, impertinent flies. And you recall an enduring question: Why did God create flies?

Scattered mounds of earth left in the wake of an earthquake stirred by God's wrath. Sand dunes that shot up hastily and chaotically like mushrooms. You imagine that eternity made an impromptu visit to inspect the traces of fear that lie in the present moment gazing at the abyss where a spiral staircase had once been. Did life find its way here after having escaped from the Dead Sea? Anemones emerge from the desolation, their tiny red corollas growing out of gray and black stones. A bit of mist and light suffice for life to overpower nothingness. A bit of hope and time suffice for you to cross

the mountain trails of myth; you were spared the fate of your ancestors. So borrow the wisdom of the anemones and say: Nothingness does not concern me, even if death besieges me.

If they ask you about the power of poetry, say: Grass is not as fragile as we might perceive. It never breaks, since it hides its modest shadow in the earth's secret. Grass growing on rocks has the inimitability of words revealed from the unknown, without clamor or bells. Grass is a spontaneous prophecy without a prophet, except its drought-resistant color. Grass is the traveler surviving the ugliness of the scene and an army besieging the road to the possible. Grass is the fluent poetry of intuition; easy, yet inaccessible, and inaccessible, yet easy. It is language coming closer to meaning, and meaning bound to the hospitality of hope.

If they ask you: Do you scoop from the sea or do you chisel in stone? Say: Nothing cuts into stone except water. If they ask you about the struggle between poetry and death, look at the grass and speak truthfully: No poetry can defeat death when they meet, but it postpones it. It postpones it until a necessary stretch of time has elapsed. Singing can be put to the test during a long concert, until the song is over and the singer falls into the hands of a sniper behind the door. Perhaps no one will notice the singer's death as long as the song has become communal and is sung throughout the night. During this hiatus, fresh singers imagine that death has been sleeping. Without death noticing, they wake up to anemones welcoming them, like the openings of unfinished Canaanite poems abandoned by deer shepherds busy chasing wolves and jackals.

On the coastal road running north you empty your heart of its excess cargo so it can be filled with gifts of the place: trees, fragrances, the songs of nightingales, musical scores, and agonies. All that remains of heaven's features in your mind is your last turn, on the stone stairwell, to a half-open window through which you caught a glimpse of the sea and the sunset, then sank into a solitude: *The sun and I are intimate friends. Deprived of walking the street at night, meaning might appeal to me or it might not. But I am addicted to the rhythm of songs.*

The wind of longing blows to your right, from the orange groves, and to your left, from the sea salt. A fog, approaching the chambers of your heart from the north, makes it difficult for memory to distinguish what is private from what is public. You fear for the present stifled by the hegemony of the past and fear for the past from the absurdity of the present. You do not know where to stand at this crossroads. Are you what you were, or what you are now? You fear you will forget tomorrow while mired in the question: In which time do I live?

Confusion arises between the tourist's curiosity, the visitor's sadness, and the returnee's joy, diverting you from what you are feeling. Three decades of the self's absence from its roots turns the place itself into an orphan, and the self into a wandering piece of land. The song might swell, but the singer's heart is pierced, and so his errors are multiplied. One of his errors was to bid farewell to what he saw, seeing only the beauty of a mirage promising hope. What can you do when you reach Mount Carmel except ask: Why did you come down from the mountain? Your ever-perplexed self offers only the vaguest of responses: to learn how to walk on unfamiliar roads.

On the magical coastal road there are shades of your past and a tolerant sort of beauty that absolves the absent of all sins, like a painting oblivious to who is absent or present within it. The morning is clean, springy, like an apricot, sunny and flowing. Your heart takes in the scene that rushes from azure to green through the windowpane of the car speeding to a meeting that turns into its opposite. Quite a meeting with room for only one seat: either you, or Emile Habiby, who rushed over to settle his score with you – with a life bearing no resemblance to real life except in the way it has survived the traps of myth set by a skilled hunter. He resisted thanks to his laughter and by ridiculing both the cunning of the hunter and the trickery of the grouse. He coined the expression "the pessoptimist" in order to find his freedom, which was locked in two states: he is neither himself nor his other. He is stricken by a condition that can only be expressed through laughter. But he defends his perplexity and doubt with a certitude that does not sprout from doubt. There exists a contradiction between his literary work and his

public persona that can only be resolved by the reader with a bias toward literature's truthfulness and the priority of the text over its margins. He said, ridiculing himself: I used to have a hen that laid golden eggs, so I ate it. He knew the power of sarcasm so well that it would wound him when he became its target. The sarcastic have no defense against sarcasm. He would use your own words against you whenever you were not of one mind. As he was making the preparations for his own funeral, however, and staking his claim to his share of immortality, he implored you, as if composing a will, to agree to a filmed conversation with him where you used to live on ʻAbbās Street.

When you said to him: O Abu Salam, how can I get to Haifa from Ramallah when this state, so heavily armed with prohibitions, stands between us? He said: I will do everything in my power to get a permit allowing you to visit the Galilee for two days. But do not be late, because death has left me very little time. In the evening they delivered the good news that you would be able to travel to Haifa in the morning. That night you saw two roosters dueling before the camera, feathers flying in the air. At three in the morning they woke you to tell you that Emile Habiby had not been able to wait. He had departed this life. You travel to Nazareth to take part in the funeral and the memorial service. Emile Habiby asked that it be written on his tombstone: "Staying in Haifa."

On the coastal road you wondered: What if I had stayed in Haifa? What if I had stayed anywhere? What if I had? What if I hadn't? You avoid reaching the conclusion: Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. All of a sudden, a light rain falls and drenches your soul, and the butterflies. Mist and light. Butterflies flutter low on the coastal road. Butterflies are scattered thoughts and feelings flying through the air.

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XVIII

. . . .

The imagination soars, visible like clouds over hills with villages strapped to their sides as they cling to their genesis. You've collected enough minutiae to fill a book, one that would leave the final chapter open for both reader and writer. Galilee has poems written in mystic delirium and by the dead who are practicing a return to their childhood, which the butterflies saved from oblivion. The villages buried under the earth send their memories to the surviving villages, whose inhabitants make the pilgrimage each spring to patches where the grass sprouts from the past: we were born right here, at the edge of this well, just as mallow, wild chicory, and rue are born. And I was born here just as imagination is gradually born from everything else. So how will you nurse your imagination back to health and once again fly on your horse?

There is no trace of al-Birweh on the right side of the road from Nazareth, except for its place in your imagination that is now pierced by the horns of bulls, chewing and mulling over your memory fodder. You said: I will pass by at sunset to let the darkness feed my imagination and help the stranger in me sculpt images from stone. You said: I will pass by at sunset lest someone notice me searching for it amidst all I have lost. I will sing the praises of absurdity and let it transport the imagination back to a lovely abandon that will mend the place's garment. You said: I will pass by at sunset so that

form might agree with meaning and allow it to shelter me. I will whisper to it:

This is I. This is he.

This is the miserable one, son of the miserable man and miserable woman. Son of your water and fire. I came from you, from nothingness, from one of your old poems, I came. I came from the imagination to return it to you and to carve your name, in stone like all the other poets of this wasteland. I asked a mule about its father and it said to me:

My uncle is a horse. Then it disappeared.

I asked a girl about her father. She became shy and said: Perhaps it is you, and then she slipped into the fog.

I asked a lark that was whispering to its mother about its mother. It approached and said: Perhaps she is you, so please carry me. And it slept in my hand.

I asked myself: Who am I?

The nocturnal echo around me responded: Who am I?

This is I. This is he.

This is all of my imagination.

Then you went on to your mother's house, next to the land of your first imagination. You did not recognize the road's landmarks, because the place was cluttered helter-skelter with houses and children, who seemed to be multiplying, screaming at one another: This is my paternal uncle. That is my maternal uncle. You had never noticed that you were an uncle, just as you had never known that your mother used to sing. She ululates and sings you songs, calling you by your full name. She sees you as a knight

returning from the myth's journey. You ask her to stop spinning glory from the rhythms of deprivation and distance. For you are only her son and she is only your mother. You embrace each other in front of handheld cameras trained on two hearts.

She says to you: Did your friend have to die so that we might see you? Would there be no other way for this celebration of ours to happen except through your friend's funeral? To ward off her cutting words, you ask her why she hit you when you were a child. She blushes and says: You were naughty. Your mother is your mother with her fair skin, long hair, and tongue that bites like a blade. An encyclopedia of details, she narrates lengthy comparisons between the past and the present. Whatever once was, was better than what is now: the water from the well is better than tap water, kerosene lamps are better than electric lights, and the old days are paradise lost. The Nakba stabbed her in the heart and saddled her with the earthquake's aftermath. She resisted misery with pride and with a spiritual power that gave her body the strength of a horse. She is never tired, or never allows tiredness to voice a complaint. Instead she rails against time, which transformed her family from peasants into refugees. With stinging sarcasm she tamed misery and kept it on this side of insult. Just as she instilled in you the sacredness of dignity and taught you to rely on yourself when it came to playing, studying, and ironing your shirts.

Your mother is your mother, and when you are together, you are her son. But when you are in the presence of others, she plays the role of the witness. She guards a distance that keeps you as a special guest of her motherhood and lets you remain a public person on whom she lays no claim. As if she were thinking and whispering to herself: I gave birth to him first, but he is the one who went on giving birth to himself. Even in her old age she relies on herself for everything. She does not allow any of her children or grandchildren the joy of helping her. She rises at dawn, prays, prepares her coffee, and cleans her house. She waters her flowers in the small courtyard. She dusts every last corner, even in your old library, then washes her clothes, cooks her food, and awaits her guests. If she complains, it is only of the dearth of listeners for her tales. They encourage her to buy a

television to keep her company, but she refuses, because she cannot stand the chatter of the announcers or imagine being a mere listener. She wants to be the announcer.

The next day you join her for her morning coffee, the famous coffee whose aroma wafted through the song you wrote more than three decades ago in your second prison term. You ask her: Do you like that song? Shyly, she smiles and only says: May God be pleased with you. She reminds you that you should go visit your father's grave before the guests arrive. You look at his picture on the wall in front of you, hiding your sorrow and grief over this man as patient as Job and whose ease the Nakba turned to distress. He spent his life looking for bread and books for you and your siblings in his exhausting struggle with stone. He did not stare long, as his own father had, at his happy past, which stared at him from olive groves and wheat fields, just so the defeated would not have to meet the eye of the robbed. He bore the burden of the present, as it was, like a dethroned king who could not bring himself to look at his throne, to take you toward tomorrow: tomorrow is ahead of you, my son, so do not look back until your body and your poems are strong enough. When you grew strong enough, it seemed to you that you became a father to your father and that poetry had the power to alter destinies, so you started building imaginary homes out of your rubble and out of the names of plants and objects so that place could again stand in its place and life could return to something that resembled life.

Your father is your father. Whenever you sit with him you speak hurriedly, and he does not expose his wound in front of you. You do not know how to hide the cruelty of your pity from him, so you inherited his wound. In a distant summer, on the roof of a distant mud hut, your father's voice rattled in his throat as he said to all of you: I can no longer support your education, all three of you together. I am tired. One of you has to volunteer to leave school and help me. My back can no longer carry the rock alone. Noble-minded, you all competed. Each of you said: I will. I will. Your father's tears streamed down before you and you all cried with and for him. He suddenly said: No, no one. The moon waned that night and each one of you came to embrace his dream and slept.

You recited the *fātiḥa* at your father's grave, where he sleeps in the lap of his father. You said: It is my turn now. Your father had died from sunstroke while making the pilgrimage. Now you are preparing yourself for death after making the pilgrimage to your father's grave. You will not die from sunstroke, but rather from moonstroke, because it is spring.

Imagination falls from above. It rolls like a chestnut down the road to Acre and disappears amid the traffic. Imagination is the vertical emanation of the image from a moment pregnant with the awareness of a known guided by the unconscious toward an unknown. Imagination is a secret companion who helps you correct typos in the book of the universe. The eye of insight sees yet cannot be seen. When we see the imagination outside itself, we know it is afflicted. When imagination is afflicted, poetry dies. Is that why you are afraid of Acre, which you have described as "the oldest of beautiful cities, the most beautiful of old cities"? Acre is the vivid setting of your first loss and your first sea. It is all that it is, but the imagination crumbles from its walls like lime. You walk its dark alleys, free of imagination, as if treading on your self: here by the sea is a door leading to your first prison. This is the seashore where you contemplated the sunset, as well as the yellow corncobs in the hands of girls sashaying along and telling little tales that you wish you could have slipped into, in order to tell your own tale. You wished that you yourself had been a tale.

In Haifa you avoided testing the imagination in the room where it had trained you to step out of yourself. You were content with observing, like a bird watching a feather clinging to the bitter orange tree.

Imagination fell from the tree. Will you lift it a bit, just a bit higher!

You said: "Had the earth not been round, I would have continued to walk."

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XIX

. . . .

You are stretched out peacefully before me. You are calm, and not concerned about what surrounds you. A neutral sky above us; around us, directions identified by their trees:

East is a barren palm
West is a eucalyptus to drive away mosquitoes
North is a willow at the junction of two epochs
South is an olive tree

I recite parts of your address for yourself so that the place may hear, yet it remains oblivious to you and me. The address you had wished might cast a long shadow, if only because the void surrounding us might like something to entertain it. No one is with us, and no one will threaten to interrupt us out of boredom. No one will draw my attention to the fact that an elegy is an encomium that arrives a lifetime too late.

You are stretched out before me like a thought testing its bearer's patience to endure it; like a poem listening to its poet and testing the soundness of sight and insight, whispering: You are being truthful, or you are lying!

You said to me: I entrust you to yourself, for many whom I loved have betrayed me. "They betrayed me like the brook." They envied me for my

eloquent wound because it had found something of an eloquent description for the powerful absence present in my words. Therefore I relieved them of the embarrassment of hypocrisy, for hearts do not reach throats when they are heavy, and I excused them for tears induced by a whiff of pepper.

You said to me: I have no need to confess because I have no secrets. My scandal, ever since the day my heart got ahead of my tongue, has been a non-secret. I can love a thing but turn against it lest it enslave me. I only hate hatred, because it poisons one's capacity to love simple things. I pity those whose hate is tied to their addiction to walking on shadows they keep mistaking for their own, imprisoning their lives in one sole invention: my mistakes!

And you said to me: I have never disagreed with a woman except as to the definition of love. You said to me: What is definable is knowable and what is knowable can be possessed and what can be possessed can be violated, consumed, and will perish.

You said to me: Love is neither happiness nor misery, but rather the senses finding the harmony and discord of resemblance through ever-renewing desire. If we had known the one who loved us more than we knew the one we love, love would have remained as ambivalent as ever, happiness would have remained a throw of the dice, and the poet would have had to borrow the absent one's feelings. If only we had known the one who loves us before we knew the one we love!

You said to me: If I die before you do, protect me from canned words that have exceeded their expiration date from the moment the first speaker stood at a podium. Sow the ground near where I sleep, so a blade of grass may show you that death is but another type of tilling.

What can I say to you, my friend, in the presence of this pure absence, now that you have dictated this fragmented farewell address, free of grief, gracefully chaotic, free of a single tear lest words get dripped upon.

Yes, yes, your only wish is to forbid overinterpretation. Your enemies, open and secret, are many. You said to me: Fear only those who never get bored. As for your loved ones, they are there busy gathering the small gifts that life offers, such as a greeting from a flower that laughs unexpectedly, a girl who notices cherries budding, gradually, in one of the body's provinces. They are happy that none of their sons died today and happy that an earthquake did not strike the tents they pitched on the edge of an abyss. They get bored with hope, just as one can grow bored with the same dinner, but they return to dinner, and to hope.

Beware, you said, of those who never get bored and who overinterpret. For they can dissect a flower to spot decay at the root of its scent and might warn the lover that a kiss invites disease. They can judge you for a poetic metaphor and for the freedom of your imagination, because beauty offends them and because stock patriotic poetry is ugly and because your absence might deprive them of their raison d'être.

You said: I have many enemies, so do not love me, for they may multiply.

Don't worry! Don't worry! Here, where I cannot distinguish between your grave and my place of birth, no one judges anyone. The howdah of words leads neither to reality nor to the imagination. Here we settle scores with the heart and say to our thoughts: Go away, because the dead had a life before this death. A life that was less than a life and more than just a passing visit. Here, the heart looks up and a belated regret reveals itself. Regret for what we did not do: Why did we not take life seriously? Why did we rush so much when the end is obvious and the beginning is obscure?

You said: The frenzy of searching for life in life itself did not allow us the chance to fully submit to our instinct's guidance. So we said: Poetry is the poet, when we should have believed poetry and disbelieved the poet. May I read you anew to try to grasp how skill guides the wind of expression and turns each tree into a woman and each woman into a tree, so we end up lying to both woman and tree? Can poetry ever be truthful without this?

You said: When the image is identical to reality, the imagination is compelled to be neutral. Therefore let the image of the object lie to the object so we can see what lies beyond the object, and in the light of that vision see what saves us from nothingness.

With which of my many hearts shall I call on you: Wait for me no matter how late I am! Did you not live in my place, just as someone died in my place without my saying: Thank you! I am he, but I do not see him. I am the one indebted to a supremely absurd coincidence that occurred on the street. Had I rushed or slowed down a bit, I would have died on behalf of another and he would have lived my life on my behalf. He is none other than me, but he does not see me. He is the one indebted to a supremely absurd coincidence. How often did we say that we have to continue the life of others within us, not just as we wish, but as those in whose place we are living would wish.

You said: Be me and only betray me insofar as rhythm drives you away from me, until the beating of a rhyme brings you back to me.

You said: Do not think of immortality, for it is but one of the negative or positive effects of the accident of existence. It is the soul's fear at the moment of its liberation from a body it has grown familiar with through the experience of dwelling in it, or perhaps its return to the one from whom I had borrowed life when he died in my place.

As you lie stretched out before me, I do not know who is dead and who is alive inside you, except through what you dictate of an address you wanted to be lengthy, so as to train the soul to test its freedom or servitude to the beings and words granted to it. If you are the one saying what I am now saying in your silence, then death will be no more than a means for the soul to find the journey awaiting it. If I am the one saying what I say to you now, on this stone, then I am death's ultimate excuse to introduce life to its obscure antagonist. An antagonist incapable of introducing life to its opposite in another place, or non-place, which those who fear nothingness have called immortality.

So sleep peacefully, peacefully if you can
Sleep peacefully in your words
and dream that you are dreaming
Sleep as peacefully as possible
I will ward off mosquitoes
crocodile tears
and friends who loved your wounds
but abandoned you when you made
your cross a writing desk
Sleep quietly at your side
sleep quietly
I will guard your dreams
I am alone as you are alone at this hour
The earth is lofty
lofty as thoughts
The sky is a metaphor, like the poem
Blue, green, white
White
White
White

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XX

. . . .

I scatter you before me, line by line, with a mastery I possessed only in beginnings. I prolong my address like a poet reserving the last stanza to contemplate his past diversions.

His diversions include counting the steps of the stairwell he sees before him, strolling on side streets, collecting seashells, and befriending idleness.

Idleness is both hard work and a gift. It is emptying the heart of its extra beats and knowing how to distinguish between time and Time. He who has more time is freed from fearing Time.

Time is a smooth river for the one who does not notice it, and fierce and brutal for the one who gazes at it and is snatched by the abyss.

The abyss is the seduction of depths and the gravitational pull of the unknown, when the sky becomes a gaping expanse, thick with clouds.

Clouds, my friend, drape you and me in their cotton in this place whose own attributes are masked by their lightness of form and essence of meaning.

Meaning, too, waves from afar with a celestial hand whose fingers have been worn down to stubs by excessive tilling of a fallow land – there is no happiness.

Happiness is a spiritual substance; those who agree that luck is talent and talent is luck disagree over its definition. Those who possess it and keep it locked away in a box disagree over how to sing its praises. It is nothing but a bribe from the impossible.

The impossible is the ambitious possible, which goes out onto the street brandishing shears to trim dry branches and ideas, and to teach the dreamer how to manage the day in accordance with what he sees.

He sees that the flutter of a butterfly's wings, in the kaleidoscope of color, is the best remedy for pain.

Pain: when you do not think about it, you do not feel it, as if it were honoring your calm as you face nothingness, a nothingness that has no opinion about you, nor do you of it. Pain does not see and cannot be seen: it is the nothing growing full.

Full is the moon over our seclusion in this void. Full is my memory.

My memory is a pomegranate. Shall I open it over you and let it scatter, seed by seed: red pearls befitting a farewell that asks nothing of me except forgetfulness?

Forgetfulness is the training of imagination to respect reality by letting language rise above it. It is homegrown hope holding an incomplete image of tomorrow.

Tomorrow is now here before us, my friend, disrobed of Time, thrown in a ditch, waiting for a metaphysical fig leaf to cover the private parts of the one passing.

Passing from the night of light to the light of night.

Night descends upon us and we must tend to the concerns of those who left us for their own private night, forgetting or recalling a portion of the long farewell.

Farewell is the silence separating sound from echo. Sound is broken and echo is preserved by attentive valleys and caves – the world's ears – listening closely as it reverberates into the echo of an echo.

The echo is the traveler's plea to the transient, a bird tracking another bird, the end insisting on prolonging the tale. The echo is the carving of a name in the air.

The air is cold, my friend, cold and refreshing. There is no one but me to entertain you and distract you from what you are feeling in these two meters of nothingness. Nothingness is two meters surrounded by plants poised to inhale oxygen. Nothingness is surrounded by cold refreshing air. I will sow violet seeds in these two meters and water them so that nothingness may rise up and run far away.

Far away our dreams have nothing to do with what we do. The wind carries the night and goes on, and there is no destination.

The destination differs from one road to another. But many and rugged are the roads and life's supplies are scarce.

Scarce are the songs.

Songs, we need only to listen closely to hear death apologizing to those it has tapped, and to steal a glance at the riches of prose.

Prose is poetry's neighbor and a picnic for the poet.

The poet is the one perplexed between prose and poetry.

Poetry is hiding ephemera from the ephemeral; it is a phrase slipped in between verb, subject, and object: the woman, while hiding her tears, left her boyfriend. Between “the woman” and “left her boyfriend” there is enough time for the salt of anger to dissolve, and for the glimmer of stars.

Stars gaze down at us, my friend, like golden buttons shimmering on eternity’s coat. They gaze down at us from a distant death that has yet to reach us. As I recite my address to you, a star slips into my words and illuminates my darkness: Perhaps death is a metaphor to remind us of a secret of life we failed to notice. So what is it?

What is it? Were we to know, our plans would have changed, for what we do not know exists and what we do know is limited and bound to change. Grass, stronger than you and me, grows on your grave and I do not know whether or not to grieve, because life is a dancing widow who only takes interest in what she needs.

She needs the praise of the dead as well as their reproach: Had you told us who you were and that there was a death more cruel than you, we would have loved and venerated you. We would have lightened the load of the journey.

The journey is a destination.

The destination is seducing the unknown.

The unknown is distant and near, luring us into being filled with boundless ignorance, and we strive to master yet another ignorance. But we are content with searching for a known that guides us to life within life, so that the known becomes difficult.

Difficult, everything was. A host of shadows was present in your shadow. You do not know who walks inside you. Within you lies a crossroads marked by the tracks of invaders who descend like paratroopers trained in using your plows. In your name there are errors caused by a great inferno

on the map. Roman ruins are built upon your home. As for you, your only image is that of a ghost.

A ghost teaches the guard to stay awake. Tea and a rifle. If sleep overwhelms the guard on duty, the tea is cold, the rifle falls from his hands, and the Native American slips into the tale.

The tale is that you are a Native American, a Red Indian.

Red are your feathers, not your blood. You are a nightmare for the one staying awake.

Staying awake to drive absence away and to massage the muscles of eternity.

Eternity is the property of the guard. Real estate and investment. If need be, he will become a disciplined soldier in a war with no truce and on the horizon no peace.

Peace be upon you the day you were born, and the day you are resurrected in the leaves of the tree.

The tree is a green expression of gratitude the earth sends in a soliloquy to its neighbor, the sky.

The sky rewards it with drops of rain.

Rain falling on you and me. A light rain refreshing us as the night begins. Drop by drop I count them, just as I count the beats of my parched heart. I stand for a long time and prolong my address. Perhaps you will rise and return with me somewhere, or I will go with you nowhere, as if I were called upon: Await revelation!

Revelation is the heart’s proof of what it knows not, and of what is higher.

Higher and farther. I see a bird, you and I are its wings. It takes us to a place beyond vision, on a journey with no end and no beginning, no intention or objective. I do not speak to you, nor do you speak to me. We only hear the music of silence.

Silence is a friend reassured by a friend, and imagination's confidence in itself, between rain and a rainbow.

A rainbow is revelation provoking the poet, without permission, and the poet's infatuation with the Qur'an.

So which of your Lord's favors do you two deny?

You and I are absent, you and I are present

and absent.

So which of your Lord's favors do you two deny?

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ENDNOTES

. . . .

Epigraph

Mālik Ibn al-Rayb al-Tamīmī (d. 676) was a premodern Arab poet. The epigraph Darwish uses is a verse from Mālik's most famous poem, a self-elegy. On his way back home to Najd after taking part in quelling a rebellion, he was bit by a snake and fell ill. Feeling that death was at hand, he composed this poem elegizing himself. It is one of the most memorable in the genre of self-elegy, which dates back to pre-Islamic Arab poetry.

Preface

"Trojan poet." See interview in *Libération*, 10 May, 2003.

I

"Allow me, then, as we part company at this threshold, to break the contract between one absurdity and another." In the original, "threshold" is "barzakh," which means "barrier," "separation," or "threshold." In eschatological terms, it refers to the boundary between the world of humans and that of pure spirits. It can also be read in a more concrete sense as "the grave." "Barzakh" is a term often used by mystics in their writings.

Ney: A reed flute.

"If only the young man were a stone." The line is from a verse by Tamīm ibn Ubay ibn Muqbil (d. 657): "Mā aṭyaba 'l-ashyā'a law anna 'l-fatā ḥajaru" (How beautiful would things be, if only the young man were stone). Darwish has used this line and notion in his poetry. See, for example, "Mūsīqā 'Arabiyya" (Arabic Music), where the poem starts and ends with "Layta 'l-fatā ḥajarun/Yā laytanī ḥajarū" (If only the young man were a stone / If only I were a stone). *Dīwān Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1994), pp. 81–82.

II

". . . the well of the story." The reference is to the Qur'anic and biblical story of Joseph and his brothers, who conspire to throw him into the well out of jealousy. Darwish used the narrative in his poem "Anā Yūsuf Yā Abī" (I am Joseph, O Father), published in *Wardun Aqall* (Fewer Roses). See *Dīwān Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, vol. 2, p. 359.

III

"You can smell the scent of the rose from the final *Tā'* wrapped around itself like a blossoming bud." *Tā'*: The third letter of the Arabic alphabet. When in the final position in a word and following a nonconnecting letter, the letter *tā'* is written as follows: ـة. In the word "rose" وردة, the "tied" (since its ends are tied together) *tā*' resembles a rose. A final *tā*' is written independently when it follows a nonconnecting letter: ت. The word *tūt* (berry) includes a final "open" *tā'* and an initial connected *tā'*: قت.

"The letter *Nūn*, independent, like a copper plate big enough to hold a full moon, . . ." *Nūn:* the twenty-fifth letter of the Arabic alphabet. When written independently, it resembles a plate: ن). *Nūn* is at the heart of *anā* (I) and is the first and last letter of *naḥn* (we).

Al-Raḥmān: *Al-Raḥmān* (The Compassionate) is *sūra* fifty-five in the Qur'an. Its ending rhyme letter is *Nūn.*

". . . the rhythm spurred on by the letter *Nūn."* The names of the various units used to measure poetic feet in Arabic prosody all end in *Nūn.*

Antara: 'Antara b. Shaddād, a poet and warrior of the sixth century and one of the poets of the *Mu'allaqāt* (Arabian Odes).

Al-Muhalhil: Al-Muhalhil (d. 531) was also a warrior poet. Both he and Antara became protagonists in popular epics, romances, and oral folktales in the Arab world.

IV

"A word of eight letters." *Waṭan* (homeland) in Arabic is written in three letters: وطن The original here was "three."

Ḥā': The letter *ḥā'* is the middle letter in the word *baḥr* بحر (sea).

V

Nakba: "Catastrophe" or "disaster." The 1948 forced displacement by Israeli forces of more than seven hundred thousand Palestinians and the destruction and depopulation of more than four hundred villages. See Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld, 2006).

'Aba'a: A wool cloak.

VIII

National flag: The colors of the Palestinian flag, and those of most Arab nation-states are green, red, white, and black. The verse Darwish is referring to is by Ṣafiyy al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (1278–1349): "White are our deeds, black our battles / Green our fields, red our swords." The nascent pan-Arab movements of the early twentieth century used these colors for their flags and banners and so did modern Arab nation-states.

Dayr Yasin: A Palestinian village near Jerusalem. It was attacked on April 9, 1948, by the Irgun and Stern gangs. More than one hundred Palestinian civilians were murdered. News of the massacre terrified Palestinians into fleeing their villages for fear of a similar fate. It became a monumental event in the history of the Nakba and Palestinian collective memory.

Hiram: The biblical king of Tyre. He reigned from 980 to 947 BC.

IX

Darwish lived in Beirut between 1973 and 1982. He left after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Beirut siege, which forced the Palestinian resistance and the PLO to depart. See Darwish's recollections of a single day under siege in *Memory for Forgetfulness*, tr. Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Sabra and Shatila: Two camps of Palestinian refugees in Beirut. During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and after the occupation of Beirut and the departure of the PLO, Lebanese militias were aided and abetted by the Israelis to enter the camps. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth of September, they slaughtered hundreds of civilians. For more, see Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, *Sabra and Shatila: September 1982* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

Jean Genet (1910–1986), the French writer, was one of the first foreigners to enter the camps of Sabra and Shatila, a day after the massacre. The English excerpt is from Jean Genet, "Four Hours in Shatila," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–22.

X

Darwish lived in exile in Paris from 1985 to 1995, and it was one of his most prolific periods.

"How can anyone die on a day like this?" Darwish is quoting and reworking a line from one of his poems. "How can silver birds die on a day like this? How can anyone die on a day like this? See "Samā'un li-Baḥrin" (A Sky for a Sea) in *Dīwān Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1994), p. 369.

"My homeland is not a suitcase" and "My homeland is a suitcase" are two famous lines from Darwish's poems.

XIII

Vienna: Darwish underwent heart surgery in 1984. Recalling that experience, Darwish said, "My heart stopped for two minutes. They gave me an electric shock, but before that I saw myself

swimming on white clouds. I remembered my entire childhood. I gave myself to death and felt pain only when I came back to life." See Maya Jaggi, "Poet of the Arab world," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2002.

Paris: Darwish had his second heart surgery in Paris in 1998.

Gate of the Sun (Bāb al-Shams) is the title of Elias Khoury's novel. See Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun* (New York: Archipelago, 2006).

XVI

Tunisia hosted the PLO after its exodus from Beirut following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Beirut siege of 1982. Following the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, many of the activists and former fighters returned from Tunisia to the newly established entity. Darwish is referring to an emotional farewell in Tunis, where he cried while thanking the Tunisian people for their hospitality and remembering Khalil al-Wazir (1935–1988), also known as Abu Jihad, one of the major Palestinian leaders, who was assassinated in Tunis in 1988. See *Ḥīrat al-'Ā'id* (The Perplexity of the Returnee) (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2007), pp. 11–15.

". . . was it because you were the one who formulated the declaration . . ." Darwish cowrote the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence.

"Gaza and Jericho first": This was one of the mantras of the Oslo Accords (1993) and the name of the first phase of the "process." The Palestinian Authority was given limited control and sovereignty over these two cities, and depending on its performance in this phase, it would later be given more control over other areas. For a critique of Oslo and its aftermath, see Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

Mu'īn Basīsū (1927–1984), was a major Palestinian poet, playwright, and journalist. He was born in Gaza and studied in Egypt. He was politically active and became the secretary general of the Palestine Communist Party in Gaza.

Al-'Arish: An Egyptian city in the Sinai, on the Mediterranean, close to the border with the Gaza Strip, and the last major stop before entering Gaza from the Egyptian side.

XVII

The Allenby Bridge: A bridge over the Jordan River. It connects Jericho in the Palestinian West Bank to Jordan and is one of the major entry points to the occupied Palestinian territories and the only international exit point for Palestinians in the West Bank. Its west side is controlled by the Israeli army, and Palestinians passing through are subjected to harsh and humiliating procedures.

The Jericho Rose: Also known as the Palestinian tumbleweed, the resurrection plant, or Mary's flower.

The excerpt is from the New Testament, Matthew 4:8-11. For the Arabic, see *Al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas: Al-'Ahd al-Jadīd*, 7th ed. (Beirut: Al-Maṭba'a al-Kāthūlīkiyya, 1969).

"Do you scoop from the sea or do you chisel in stone?" An oft-quoted line in Arabic literary history is "Jarīr scoops from a sea and al-Farazdaq chisels in stone." It is intended to contrast two styles and approaches to diction and poetry, one easy flowing and seemingly effortless, the other marked by obscure words and artifice.

Emile Habiby (1922–1996) was one of the foremost Palestinian and Arab writers. He grew up in Haifa, then moved to Nazareth in 1956. He was politically active at an early age. He joined the Palestine Communist Party in 1940 and the National Liberation League in 1943. After 1948, he helped found the Israeli Communist Party and was an outspoken member of the Israeli Knesset from 1953 to 1972. Habiby was also a journalist and became editor-in-chief of *al-Ittiḥād*, the Arabic daily newspaper of the Palestine Communist Party in 1944, where Darwish himself later worked and wrote. Habiby wrote several plays and novels, the most famous of which is *al-Mutashā'il (The Pessoptimist*, 1974). Its full title is *al-Waqā'i' al-Gharība fī Ikhtifā' Sa'īd Abī'l-Naḥs al-Mutashā'il* (The Strange Events Surrounding the Disappearance of the Ill-Fated Sa'īd, the Pessoptimist). See *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, tr. Trevor LeGassick and Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Interlink, 2001). He died on May 3, 1996, right before a planned meeting with Darwish for a documentary that was being produced on Habiby's life. Habiby requested that his tombstone read, "Emile Habiby – Staying in Haifa." Darwish's last collection, published posthumously in 2009, included a poem dedicated to him. See "Maw'id ma' Imīl Ḥabībī" (A Rendezvous with Emile Habiby) in Maḥmūd Darwīsh, *Lā Urīdu li Hādhī 'l-Qaṣīdati an Tantahī* (I Don't Want This Poem to End) (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2009), pp. 112–114.

XVIII

Al-Birweh: The poet's village in the Galilee. It was depopulated and razed after 1948. For more, see *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, ed. Walid Khalidi (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006), pp. 9–10.

". . . you join her for her morning coffee . . ." Darwish's poem *Ilā Ummī* (For My Mother), from his 1966 collection, *'Āshiq min Filasṭīn* (A Lover from Palestine), was put to music, like many of Darwish's poems, by the Lebanese composer and singer Marcel Khalife and has enjoyed immense popularity ever since. See *Dīwān Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, vol. 1, 12th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1987), pp. 98–99.

Fātiḥa: *Al-Fātiḥa* is the *opening sūra* of the Qur'an.

XX

"Red Indian." Darwish was drawn to the tragic history of Native Americans. One of his great poems 'The Penultimate Speech of the Red Indian Before the White Man' (*Khuṭbat al-Hindiyy al-Aḥmar Mā Qabla al-Akhīra Amām al-Rajul al-Abyaḍ*) was written in 1992 to commemorate the quincentennial of 1492. *See Aḥada 'ashara kawkaban* (Eleven Planets) (Casablanca: Tūbqāl, 2001) p. 53. *Al-Karmil*, the journal Darwish founded and edited published a special issue on the occasion. See *al-Karmil*, no. 45 (1992). According to the Syrian critic Ṣubḥī Ḥadīdī, Darwish immersed himself for months in the music, poems, and narratives of Native Americans and watched documentary films and studied hundreds of photographs in order to internalize the tragedy and history of the Native Americans. See Ṣubḥī Ḥadīdī, *'Shā'ir al-hunūd al-ḥumr'* (The Poet of the Red Indians) *al-Quds al-'Arabī* (London) 23 September, 2009.

"Which of your Lord's favors do you two deny" is the "refrain" verse from the *sūrat al-Raḥmān* (The Compassionate) in the Qur'an (*sūra* 55), Darwish's most beloved chapter of the Qur'an. The refrain is repeated thirty-one times in the chapter's eighty-seven verses. In the Qur'an, God speaks in

the first person addressing both humans and jinns, hence the dual. In Darwish's text, the verse acquires additional connotations. The two addressees in this last page are his present and absent "I," whose dialogue has structured the entire text. It is worth noting that Darwish has repeatedly expressed his fascination with the letter *Nūn*, the rhyme letter of the *al-Raḥmān* chapter and of the last four sentences of the book (in addition to section III). See, for example "Like the Letter *Nūn* in Sūrat al-Raḥmān" (Kal Nūn fī Sūrat al-Raḥmān) in *Limādhā Tarakta al-Ḥiṣān Waḥīdan* (Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?) (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 1995), pp. 73–75. In *Jidāriyya (Mural)*, his epic encounter with death, Darwish wrote: "I will say: pour me into the letter *Nūn*, where my soul will drink the *sūra* of al-Raḥmān in the Qur'an."

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